

What does it mean to be ecumenical in the Catholic tradition?

Len Airey invited me to speak to you today on ‘what does it mean to be ecumenical in the Catholic tradition’. Knowing that I was formerly a Protestant minister, he also asked if I would weave into this presentation, my own conversion story. So I will begin with some thoughts on ecumenism, then share three key moments in my own journey into the Catholic Church, and conclude with some implications in regard to how Catholics can further ecumenism amongst all Christian traditions.

By ecumenism, I mean the movement of all Christians toward unity.¹ There can be no doubt that it is the fervent desire of our Lord that his followers are united. In John 17, Jesus prays:

I ask not only on behalf of these, but also on behalf of those who will believe in me through their word,²¹ that they may all be one. As you, Father, are in me and I am in you, may they also be in us, so that the world may believe that you have sent me.²² The glory that you have given me I have given them, so that they may be one, as we are one,²³ I in them and you in me, that they may become completely one, so that the world may know that you have sent me and have loved them even as you have loved me.²

Not only does Jesus pray for unity, he links unity with apologetics and evangelisation. He prays for unity ‘so that the world may believe that you have sent me.’ Given the state of the Church today, it is no wonder that the world doesn’t believe! Before we can address a possible solution, we must take an honest survey of our situation – what are the facts on the ground? The first major schism took place in the 11th century with the Eastern Orthodox departure. The Orthodox have retained a structure similar to that of the Roman Church and have not continued to divide. The next great schism took place in the 16th century with the protestant reformation. At a time when there was great scandal and misuse of indulgences, Martin Luther challenged these misuses and pointed the Church back to scripture and specifically the book of Romans. Though he rightly challenged some bad practices in the Roman Church, the great tragedy was that in the end he chose to leave the Church entirely which led to the founding of the Lutheran Church. The implications of this schism cannot be over-emphasized. Though he encouraged people to read scripture and understand the grace of God as a gift that could not be bought, he also rejected philosophy and Church authority and set a precedent that if you disagree, you leave and found a new Church. Following in Luther’s footsteps were John Calvin, Ulrich Zwingli and in the 5 centuries that followed, over 33,000 other Christian leaders would choose to leave their traditions to begin a new one. Protestantism has founded on average 60 new denominations per year for 500 years. It was in this context of Protestantism that my own story began.

I was born the grandson of a Reformed Church Pastor. When I was 7, my own father was also ordained a Reformed Church Pastor. Needless to say, the Church always had a central role in my life, both growing up and beyond. At age 14, I too felt the sense that God was calling me

¹ Council, Second Vatican. "Decree on Ecumenism *Unitatis redintegratio*." *Vatican Council II: The conciliar and post conciliar documents*. (Northport, NY: Costello Publishing Company 1964)., Paragraph 1.

² John 17:20 -23.

to a vocation as a Pastor. Doing secondary school in a charismatic Christian school was my first experience with charismatic Christians. My whole family was attracted to the enthusiasm, faith and passion of those who had charismatic experience. This new experience eventually led to my dad, and a good percentage of his congregation, leaving the Reformed Church to found a new independent church with a focus on evangelisation and the infilling of the Holy Spirit. When I finished school, still sensing the call to be a Pastor, I went to Bible College to be formed for ministry.

Because I was now part of an independent Church, the pathway to pastoral ministry was no longer straight forward. When I finished my undergraduate degree, one of my lecturers invited me to put up my hand to be an Associate Pastor at another independent Church which was previously a Uniting Church and had left that tradition. After three years there, I was shoulder tapped to be an Associate Pastor at the Church and School where I'd been a student. In my time there, the Church also went through a split when two pastors disagreed with the Senior Pastor (Parish Priest in Catholic Language) and they founded a new independent Church. In the three Churches in which I'd been involved for 30+ years, each of them had gone through a division. Luther's precedent of division had perpetuated, and I'd seen it first-hand three times over.

In amongst all of this, God had begun to lead me down a pathway that was entirely unexpected. I already had the mindset that one should never fear searching for truth. Someone once said: 'The truth is like a lion. You don't have to defend it. Let it loose. It will defend itself.'³ I couldn't have anticipated where this searching for truth would lead me! A friend of mine had given me a podcast of Dr Peter Kreeft, a philosopher from Boston College. I had no idea that he was Catholic, but loved his lectures and began to listen to as many as I could find. After listening to a few lectures, it became clear that Kreeft was in fact Catholic. This was somewhat of a surprise to me. Up until this point, my only experience of Catholics had been negative. I'd learnt in Church history that Luther was a hero who corrected all the Catholic heresies and the only Catholics I'd met in real life were drunks at pubs who would tell me they were catholic when I'd sing a religious song at a gig. Kreeft seemed legit, which meant I needed to understand how it was that he could be catholic! (Such was my prejudice). I purchased a copy of his book 'Catholic Christianity' which is a kind of paraphrased catechism and discovered that much of what I had understood about Catholicism was wrong. More than this, there even seemed to be strong biblical support for the catholic position on many issues which I'd never heard of before. This began a journey of discovery which I will limit here to three key areas.

1. Marriage and Family.

Growing up Protestant, I'd been taught two 'unbreakable rules' for marriage and romance. Firstly, don't have sex until you're married, and secondly, don't marry a non-Christian. Whilst these two 'rules' are important and helpful – it would be good if more young Catholics abided by them – they certainly don't equip a young person with the framework to understand the mystery of marriage and family. I began reading books on John Paul II's Theology of the

³ This quote is often attributed to Augustine but its origin is contested.

Body. This led me to Pope Paul VI's encyclical called *Humanae Vitae*. Though many Catholics oppose or disregard this encyclical, I personally found it liberating. It exposed the impact of contraception on the way we think about the other gender. I even began teaching it in my Christian Studies classes. I'd ask my class three questions. Firstly, what would you look for in someone with whom you'd have a one night stand? Students would usually provide attributes that regard body shape and size, skin tone, fashion sense and often list their favorite celebrities. Needless to say, the list of attributes was shallow and usually had to do with the person being 'hot'. Secondly I'd ask: what would you look for in someone whom you'd like to become the mother or father of your children? This time answers would be more focused on character traits such as loving, respectful, faithful, loyal, intelligent, etc... This list was focused on who the person was rather than merely what they looked like. Thirdly I'd ask, what makes it possible to have one without the other – as in, have a one night stand without thinking about parenthood? Eventually someone would work it out – contraception. Contraception allows us to engage in sexual activity without thinking about parenthood. Thus, it enables us to think about the other person in terms of the 'one night stand' list instead of the 'parent' list; what they look like rather than who they are. As such, contraception has an immense impact on the way young people think about sexuality and about marriage. I personally found that this was liberating. I began to see that marriage was not about me and my own desires, but about self-giving and family – about love that is in the image of God; love that is open to life and brings forth life. Just as the individual is in the image of God, so the family is in the image of God. Just as the Holy Spirit proceeds from the love between the Father and the son, so children proceed from the love between a man and a woman. The image of God is on the family. When the family unit is broke down, the image of God is defaced. Because I'd found this catholic teaching on marriage and family so liberating, I began to wonder what else Catholicism might be right about.

2. The Eucharist.

The second turning point for me was coming to understand the Catholic understanding of the Eucharist. Jesus words in John 6 had always been mysterious to me.

“Very truly, I tell you, unless you eat the flesh of the Son of Man and drink his blood, you have no life in you. 54 Those who eat my flesh and drink my blood have eternal life, and I will raise them up on the last day; 55 for my flesh is true food and my blood is true drink. 56 Those who eat my flesh and drink my blood abide in me, and I in them. 57 Just as the living Father sent me, and I live because of the Father, so whoever eats me will live because of me. 58 This is the bread that came down from heaven, not like that which your ancestors ate, and they died. But the one who eats this bread will live forever.”⁴

If communion is merely symbolic, Jesus words are confounding. I began to read the history of the theology of the Eucharist and discovered that it had always been the teaching of the Church that the bread and wine in communion were understood as Jesus real body and blood – not merely symbols. To give one example, St Cyril in the fourth century said; “Since then he has declared and said of the bread ‘this is my body.’ Who after that will venture to doubt? And

⁴ John 6: 53 – 58.

since he has affirmed that ‘this is my blood’ who will raise a question and say it is not His blood.”⁵ The idea that it was merely symbolic was predominantly a Protestant 16th Century invention. Understanding that Jesus is really present in the Eucharist has significant implications on how we understand liturgy. A liturgy that recognizes Jesus as truly present in communion will naturally place communion at the centre as the high point of the liturgy. When Jesus is not understood to be truly present, homilies and music tend to replace communion as the centre of Christian worship. As communion is replaced, altars are removed and sanctuaries become stages. There is no longer sacrifice at the centre of Christian worship. I found an inner tension as my own theological understandings became more aligned to the Catholic Church than the denomination I served. Of course, understanding the real presence of Christ in the Eucharist naturally leads to a question of authority – who has the authority to consecrate the Host? Who has the authority to interpret scripture? These questions led me to pursue questions about Church authority and the papacy.

3. Church Authority.

The biblical foundations for the papacy are not hard to find, once you have the eyes to see them. Jesus said to Peter:

“And I tell you, you are Peter, and on this rock I will build my church, and the gates of Hades will not prevail against it. I will give you the keys of the kingdom of heaven, and whatever you bind on earth will be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth will be loosed in heaven.”⁶

Jesus gives Peter authority and the keys to the kingdom of heaven. He doesn’t give this same blessing to any of the other disciples. The role of Peter as head of the Church is also evident in the first recorded Church Council in Acts 15. When Peter speaks, the matter is resolved.⁷ Beyond this, it is the Church that confirmed which books should be included in holy scripture. Thus, to reject the authority of the Church and maintain the authority of the Bible is simply inconsistent with history. What was even more compelling for me than the biblical foundation was the simple and practical implications of what happens when there is no Pope and no magisterium. Without Church authority – scripture and tradition, biblical interpretation becomes scripture and me. We as individuals become authoritative interpreters of scripture. We might disagree, but we can both claim to have read scripture and been inspired by the Holy Spirit. Essentially, you either acknowledge the Pope and surrender yourself to the authority of the Church, or you either become your own Pope – your own authority, or you appoint your own Pope – your favourite pastor or theologian. Thus, truth becomes relative to whom you have appointed as authoritative.

A stark example of this is the Southern Baptist Convention’s statement on abortion in 1971:

⁵ Cyril, *St. Cyril of Jerusalem's lectures on the christian sacraments: the procatechesis and the five mystagogical catecheses*. Edited by Frank Leslie Cross. (London, SPCK, 1951)., 68.

⁶ Matt 16:18 – 19.

⁷ Acts 15: 6 – 11.

“Be it further RESOLVED, That we call upon Southern Baptists to work for legislation that will allow the possibility of abortion under such conditions as rape, incest, clear evidence of severe fetal deformity, and carefully ascertained evidence of the likelihood of damage to the emotional, mental, and physical health of the mother.”⁸

Whilst the Baptists have since changed their position, this example demonstrates the relativity of morality in protestant traditions. The other great problem is that without an authority to defer to, no one can resolve a debate. In a theological setting, intellectual tradition doesn't build up because nothing is ever firmly established – instead, intellectual tradition just becomes wider and wider. The only question is whether or not a particular idea fits within the realms of Christian thought – and even that is contested. It was clear to me that there could be no unity and no Church authority without a Pope.

Eventually I had to surrender to the truth I had discovered. This had massive implications in regard to my vocation and what my future might look like. Of course God calls us to trust him. We cannot deny truth just because it is inconvenient. For God, nothing is impossible. With the support of my wife, I resigned as a Protestant pastor, trusted God with our future and God has continued to guide us and provide for us.

We now turn our attention back to the question of ecumenism. As Catholics, we cannot create unity by compromising on what is true. If there are no important differences between Catholicism and Protestantism then my resignation was in vein. Our doctrines on the Pope, Mary, purgatory, the Saints and transubstantiation are all problematic to Protestants. We have already seen many attempts at ecumenism fail to varying degrees. We've tried making reasonable compromises, education, promoting tolerance, subjectivism - reduction of the truth to my truth, rationale argument, vague optimism and even uniting to fight a common enemy. Even so, we remain divided.

In *Evangelii Gaudium*, the Pope writes:

True openness involves remaining steadfast in one's deepest convictions, clear and joyful in one's own identity, while at the same time being “open to understanding those of the other party” and “knowing that dialogue can enrich each side”. What is not helpful is a diplomatic openness which says “yes” to everything in order to avoid problems, for this would be a way of deceiving others and denying them the good which we have been given to share generously with others. Evangelization and interreligious dialogue, far from being opposed, mutually support and nourish one another.⁹

Our Pope makes clear that attempts at ecumenism – and inter-religious dialogue – cannot be separated from evangelisation. Indeed, evangelisation nourishes dialogue. As such, I propose

⁸ Southern Baptist Convention, "Resolution number 4: On Abortion" in *Annual of the Southern Baptist Convention*, (Nashville: Executive Committee, Southern Baptist Convention, 1971). 72.

⁹ Pope Francis, "*Evangelii Gaudium: The Joy of the Gospel*." (Dublin: Veritas Publications, 2013)., Paragraph 251.

two essential strategies for the promotion of ecumenism which I take from the work of Dr Peter Kreeft.¹⁰

Firstly, a big stumbling block for Protestants when it comes to understanding catholic theology is the sense that Catholicism adds mediators between God and man – sacraments, priests, saints etc. Protestants agree however, that the Church is the body of Christ. If we really understand the Church as really Christ, then sacraments, priests and saints are not mediators of Christ, they are Christ – they are his body, which is Christ. Your body is you. It's not your mind or your soul, but it is you. So in ecumenical dialogue, we must lead our Protestant friends to see the church as Christ.

Secondly, if the Church is Christ – we must ask ourselves; does it look like Christ? When you go to your local parish, do you sense the love, joy, compassion, mercy and hope of Christ? If not, we have work to do! Dr Kreeft says that “when Catholics know Jesus more than Protestants do, Protestants will want to become Catholics so that they can be better Protestants.”¹¹ He says that “when Catholics are evangelized, Protestants will be sacramentalised.” We Catholics have to start first – evangelism comes first. We have to evangelise our own people. This means a rediscovering of our own tradition or in the language of recent Popes – a new evangelisation.¹²

In conclusion, ecumenism can only be achieved by Jesus. In our desire to know the truth we must recognize that for Protestants and Catholics alike, truth is not merely a collection of doctrines, it is a person – his name is Jesus. Thus, we need a truer relationship with the person, not just a truer understanding of him. As both Protestants and Catholics pursue Jesus, who is truth, we will find that Jesus leads us into deeper communion – and eventually full communion with his one holy, catholic and apostolic Church.

References

Council, Second Vatican. "Decree on Ecumenism *Unitatis redintegratio*." *Vatican Council II: The conciliar and post conciliar documents*. Northport, NY: Costello Publishing Company 1964.

Cyril, St. *Cyril of Jerusalem's lectures on the christian sacraments: the procatechesis and the five mystagogical catecheses*. Edited by Frank Leslie Cross. London, SPCK, 1951.

Francis, Pope. *Evangelii Gaudium: The Joy of the Gospel*. Dublin: Veritas Publications, 2013.

Kreeft, Peter. *Ecumenical Jihad: Ecumenism and the culture war*. Ignatius Press, 1996.

Kreeft, Peter, *Ecumenism without Compromise*, accessed 16 November 2017, http://peterkreeft.com/audio/03_ecumenism/ecumenism_transcription.htm

¹⁰ Peter Kreeft. *Ecumenical Jihad: Ecumenism and the culture war*. (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1996).

¹¹ Peter Kreeft, *Ecumenism without Compromise*, accessed 16 November 2017, http://peterkreeft.com/audio/03_ecumenism/ecumenism_transcription.htm

¹² Pope Paul, V. I. "Apostolic exhortation." *Evangelii Nuntiandi*, (Sydney: St Paul's, 1976). Though Paul VI was the first Pope to use the term, Pope John Paul II, Pope Benedict XVI and Pope Francis have all promoted the new evangelisation.

Paul VI, Pope. "*Evangelii Nuntiandi: Evangelisation in the Modern World*", Sydney: St Paul's, 1976.

Southern Baptist Convention, "Resolution number 4: On Abortion" in *Annual of the Southern Baptist Convention*, Nashville: Executive Committee, Southern Baptist Convention, 1971.