

London's Martyrs & Christian Unity

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I had a real sense of trepidation after I was asked to come along today. I am not a theologian and I am not really very articulate about doctrinal issues and historical truths. Even though I was told that that was not what you were looking for, I still worried! Then just last Monday I was at a meeting, which involved a Jesuit theologian. I told him about today and how lamentably ignorant I am about the English martyrs. I asked him for a few pointers and whether he could recommend some easily accessible background reading.

He did give me one or two pointers, but would not recommend anything to read (which I thought was a bit mean!) But he insisted, "That's all you need." I said it would not fill fifteen minutes. He said, "Oh it would, if you talk about your own lived experience of Christian unity in action, of forgiveness and reconciliation. And that is presumably why they asked you. They didn't ask you because you are a theologian - they asked you as you." So here we go!

For the last three and a half years I have been the Director of the Cardinal Hume Centre, which works with homeless young people and badly housed families and other vulnerable people. The Centre was founded by, as well as named for, the late Cardinal Basil Hume. A lot of our voluntary support comes from Catholic sources but, of course, our services are offered to all who need them. Prior to that I was with CAFOD for some 25 years as Head of the International Division for a lot of that time. It is that time which has given me the most of my experience on today's theme across this country and across the world. I am also (and this is a great privilege) a trustee of St Ethelburga's Centre for Peace and Reconciliation. Blown up by an IRA bomb in 1993, it has risen like a phoenix out of the ashes, bringing together people from across religious and political divides.

The main pointer which the Jesuit theologian gave me was to reflect on the motivation of our joint martyrs: Why did they go so willingly to their deaths? Were they dying for their concept of England? For their 'faith'? For their ideal of the Eucharist? And - more profoundly - what was the difference in their motivation?

Whether Reformation or Catholic martyrs, what was the essential difference in what led to such a cruel death?

So at this point it seemed apt to dwell on that concept of Eucharist - the point of unity and the point of disunity. I googled 'Eucharist' and those two words, 'unity' and 'disunity', and I came across reams of reflections of course. Here is just a taste:

- "The Eucharist is a hallowed means towards healing the divisions."
- "The Eucharist - the sacrament of unity."
- "It is above all at the Eucharist that Christians become one in Christ, sharing together as one body - that of Christ."
- "We confess the same faith in the one true God; we have been baptised with the same baptism and we preach the same Christ."
- "An understanding of the Eucharist is essential, therefore, to the search for Christian unity; yet for many Christians this is the point of most pain."
- "There is much need for mutual forgiveness between Christians, re-examining together our past, and the hurt which that past regrettably continues to provoke even today."

And this led me to the main part of my reflections today: about reconciliation and forgiveness. My first thoughts are about the Truth and Reconciliation Commission in South Africa, where I have had the privilege to travel often in the apartheid and post-apartheid years. I admired everyone who believed in the TRC, but felt it was ultimately flawed.

The dominant paradigm of the TRC was to bring justice without punishment - there was no other choice in transitional, post-apartheid South Africa. The TRC sought to promote the concept of co-existence, as opposed to what many believed was the unattainable expectation of reconciliation. In that light, the TRC was a *catalyst* for reconciliation and not intended to deliver reconciliation itself. The TRC was rooted in the Christian tradition of forgiveness. But, as one commentator asked at the time, "Why must it be the victim that should forgive,

while the perpetrators were granted amnesty?” I wondered how the widow in the township was expected to forgive her son's torturer - and then continue to live in her shack without power or water, whilst the murderer returned to his villa having only had to listen to his crimes, and say sorry. And yet perhaps the widow has much more grace than I and could make that journey to forgiveness.

You may know that a similar process is being undertaken in Rwanda. For many it is a welcome stage on the journey to some kind of closure. But for others, who now see the murderers of their family living freely in the same village, how can that be closure?

I wonder if there is a ‘time lapse’ issue here. At St Ethelburga's up on Bishopsgate, there is a very moving plaque in the quiet garden. It is dedicated to the reconciliation between veterans of the British Army in Burma and of the Japanese army, who meet annually to recognise and witness the mutuality of suffering and loss, of culpability and the need to forgive. One of the very newest initiatives at St Ethelburga's is to bring together again British Army veterans of the families of soldiers killed in the conflict in Northern Ireland - with former paramilitaries from both sides. And I wonder whether this very courageous move will have the same results. Or is it too soon?

I think also what is crucial here is the preconditions which need to be firmly in place before reconciliation can truly happen. Reconciliation demands amongst other things:

- A clear understanding of the past conflict (of whatever kind) is indispensable
- The admission of responsibility for pain and for causing pain
- Openness to the other and the acknowledgement of their human-ness
- Acceptance of the need to forgive and the need to move on
- It can not be forced onto anyone; and
- it has to have the aura, the underpinning, of the possibility of redemption (which comes round to the Eucharist again, of course).

Nearly ten years ago, someone attacked me in my own home and eventually was charged with attempted murder. I remember the QC who defended the attacker saying in his defence that he was kind to his mother. Not long afterwards, I was at a Christian Aid Board meeting of which I was a member. They had been fabulously supportive throughout, but another member came up and said that I would feel better and would be healed when I had forgiven him, as she had when she visited her attacker in prison. At the time I felt pure anger at her assumption about me - and still feel no inclination to forgive. I do not know if that will ever happen, because those preconditions I mentioned are not there in my case.

If we had somehow been able to tackle the issues around our martyrs at an earlier stage, where would we be today in terms of Church unity? St Ethelburga's states in its strap-line that "faith is a source of conflict and faith is a resource for transforming conflict." Its central conviction is that conflict between Christians and Muslims, who love the same God, can be transformed. This will require finding ways in which each side can value and gain understanding of the other, without having to feel the impossible weight of responsibility for reconciling the deep-rooted differences of perception and belief. If you change the words Christian and Muslim to Christian and Catholic, this has a certain power!

For me it would be scandalous indeed if our differences - however painful to many - get in the way of the gospel imperative of love of neighbour, and how that unfolds into the social justice agenda. It would be a kind of double martyrdom for those men and women of faith who did not die as 'anti-Catholics' or 'anti-Reformation' - no negative motivation could have made them go to the stake or to the Tyburn Tree. They believed in something good and profound that for them was worth dying for. For me, it would be to continue to deny their courage and conviction if we refused to collaborate for the greater good; if we put celebration of our differences above joining forces to tackle the scandal of poverty, injustice and exclusion in our world.

And, of course, there is so much to celebrate of this work. One stunning example is the joint work being undertaken as we speak in Darfur in Southern Sudan, by far - in

all my long experience - the worst and most neglected human tragedy of living times. Action for Churches Together - the relief and development arm of the World Council of Churches and Caritas Internationalis (the equivalent in the Roman Catholic Church) - has established a completely joint operation in order to reach some 300,000 of the most vulnerable of the displaced people, the vast majority of whom, of course, are Muslim. This is a stunning joint witness to what we can and must do together.

There are so many more of these examples across the world and this power of giving joint witness is apparent in so much of the work which CAFOD and Christian Aid do together – and especially with Islamic Relief in Bosnia, in Aceh and in Chechnya. There is much to divide us, but so much more which unites us. Our divisions are still deep in some quarters, but I find it a powerful reflection to dwell on the fact - in this place of all places - that our martyrs died for the same cause as each other.