



The *Status Quaestionis* of Ecumenism

Archbishop Kevin McDonald

Abstract

In 2016 Pope Francis went to Lund in Sweden for a joint service with the Lutherans to begin the events marking the 500th anniversary of the Reformation. Catholics have also been involved in conferences and other events that have been organized as part of this anniversary. The context and background to the Catholic Church's involvement is the Church's commitment to ecumenical dialogue made at the Second Vatican Council. The theological basis for that commitment is to be found in the Second Vatican Council's Constitution on the Church, *Lumen Gentium* and its Decree on Ecumenism, *Unitatis Redintegratio*.

This paper takes the opportunity of this anniversary to take stock of the progress of the ecumenical movement and notes some of the issues and challenges that have impacted upon it. As well as social and cultural factors these include the increasing importance of interreligious dialogue and its relationship to ecumenical dialogue. Ecumenists also have to take account of the widely varying interpretations of the Reformation offered by church historians.

Finally the paper argues that in the Catholic Church perceptions of ecumenism often fail to take account of the many ways in which the Second Vatican Council significantly changed the global role and profile of the Catholic Church (and the pope in particular) as a source and agent of peace and reconciliation on many different levels. Ecumenical engagement is an integral part of that continuing development which is increasingly acknowledged by political and religious leaders throughout the world.

Keywords

Ecumenism, communion, sacrament, sign, unity

In this year's conference we mark the 500th anniversary of the Reformation. Those of a mathematical turn of mind will be aware that one hundred years ago we marked the 400th anniversary of the

Reformation. Or rather we didn't mark it – we being the Catholic Church – and in Europe there was very little in the way of marking this anniversary since Europe was at war in 1917. But even if we hadn't been at war we can be fairly sure that Pope Benedict XV would not have gone to Sweden to join the celebrations and that the response of the Catholic Church to the anniversary would have been at best reticent. However, the Catholic Church has been and is involved in marking this anniversary and that is because we are in a different situation. The context has changed and the context of our marking this anniversary is the Catholic Church's robust and theologically-grounded commitment to the ecumenical movement – a commitment that was made at the Second Vatican Council just over fifty years ago.

In 1917 the modern ecumenical movement was just seven years old and the Catholic Church was not involved. In fact involvement was strongly discouraged and in its origin and ethos the nascent ecumenical movement was essentially an Anglican and Protestant movement. But in the subsequent decades, prior to the Council, theologians like de Lubac, Rahner and Congar – theologians of the *ressourcement* – were doing work in different areas of theology that prepared the ground for the Catholic Church's entry into the ecumenical movement. Their work bore great fruit and since our marking this anniversary is inextricably bound up with the Church's involvement in the ecumenical movement it is appropriate that we consider where the ecumenical movement is today and the nature and rationale of the Catholic Church's involvement in it.

My own interest in this matter goes back to the years 1985 to 1993 when I worked in the engine room of Catholic ecumenism, the Pontifical Council for Promoting Christian Unity in Rome. When I arrived there Cardinal Johannes Willebrands was still in charge, ably assisted by Bishop Pierre Duprey. Both had been present at the Council and had been involved in preparing the Decree on Ecumenism. They had worked closely with John XXIII, Paul VI and Cardinal Bea, the first head of the Secretariat for Christian Unity which later became the Pontifical Council. For me those years were a great theological education. My work included organizing the ARCIC and Catholic-Methodist Dialogues and involved getting to know theologians like Jean Marie Tillard who was steeped in the theology of communion of his fellow Dominican Yves Congar and shaped that theology into a tool or a methodology for the various international dialogue commissions.

In this paper I will offer a picture in general terms of the culture and the growth of the ecumenical movement and also identify what I think are some significant and positive outcomes of ecumenical dialogue including, of course, the Catholic-Lutheran *Joint Declaration on the Doctrine of Justification*. I will also draw attention to

some issues that raise questions about the methodology of ecumenical dialogue and have, I think, led to some rethinking of procedure and process. I will then consider some of the things that have impacted upon Catholic ecumenism. One is the social and cultural changes that have taken place during the ecumenical era in the heartlands of Christianity. I also want to consider the impact of the growth of inter-religious dialogue, which has assumed a strong profile in the world of today. Then I want to refer to the rather distinctive perceptions of the whole business of Catholic-Protestant ecumenism that I find in the writings of church historians. Much of the writing and commentary about this anniversary has naturally come from historians and, although I am not a historian, I felt it necessary to refer to some of those writings in this paper, because how you see the whole ecumenical project will inevitably be shaped by your reading and perception of the conflicts and divisions that the ecumenical movement seeks to address. Having opened that question up I will argue in conclusion that ecumenism is central to the mission of the Catholic Church.

The modern ecumenical movement is generally accepted to have begun with the World Missionary Conference in Edinburgh in 1910. It was a meeting of Protestant missionaries who had become aware of the anomaly of preaching the gospel from the vantage point of a divided Christianity. A profound spiritual conviction developed about the need for unity of faith if Christianity is to fulfil its missionary mandate and out of that conviction grew the Faith and Order movement. It became a key programme of the World Council of Churches when that eventually came into being in 1948. Mary Tanner, a leading British ecumenist who became Moderator of Faith and Order, wrote in 2012, “By the 1970s the Commission had identified three requirements for the visible unity of the church: Christians should make common confession of the apostolic faith; celebrate common sacraments and be served by one ministry; and have ways of deciding together and teaching with authority.”¹ Quite a tall order, but it neatly summarises the ecumenical agenda as far as the Faith and Order Commission of the World Council of Churches is concerned.

For the Anglican and mainline Protestant Churches the World Council of Churches became the crucial driver for this great ecumenical enterprise. For theological reasons but also for practical and logistical reasons the Catholic Church never joined the World Council of Churches. But it did after Vatican II become a full member of the Faith and Order Commission and has always been closely involved with the work of the World Council of Churches in many other ways. One of my colleagues when I worked in Rome worked

¹ John A Radano ed. *Celebrating a Century of Ecumenism* (WCC Publication 2012), p.28.

full-time on relations with the WCC. The best known achievement of Faith and Order was the Baptism, Eucharist and Ministry document of 1982. That text was the outcome of a process that sought to establish as much agreement as possible on those fundamental questions. A wide spectrum of Christians contributed to this document from Pentecostals to Catholics and also the Orthodox who did join the World Council of Churches. The final document was sent out to all the churches for them to study this remarkable ecumenical text which drew together the understanding of these sacraments that emerged from the multilateral discussions. It actually reads like a map or chart of convergences as well as different perspectives. The contributing Churches were then asked to say whether they could recognise in the text “the faith of the Church through the ages.” Responses were mostly positive and encouraging but the process did not usher in a fundamental change in relationships – certainly not as far as the relationship of the Protestant world with the Catholic and Orthodox worlds was concerned. In the background here are recurring underlying questions in ecumenical dialogue: what does it take to bring about Christian unity? What exactly are we trying to achieve?

Now I mention this document because it was one of the most important ecumenical documents that issued from multilateral ecumenical discussion and it was both bold and creative. But as with bilateral dialogues – which I shall mention in a moment – a recurring issue has been that of reception within the participating churches. There is always a tendency for Churches to judge ecumenical reports by their correspondence or otherwise with their own official teachings and formularies rather than getting involved in the process of expressing and articulating their faith in new ways. This is one of a number of issues that are simply part of the story of ecumenism, as is the fact that not all Christians are comfortable with the process of ecumenical dialogue or its assumptions.

The Catholic Church did join the ecumenical movement at Vatican II though, as I have said, it never joined the World Council of Churches. Part of the Catholic Church’s reason for not joining can, I think, be found in a key sentence in the first section of *Lumen Gentium* where it says “The Church exists in Christ as a sacrament or instrumental sign of intimate union with God and unity for the whole human race.” (LG 1). To me that is the key statement of Vatican II, breathing openness and a spirit of inclusion. But it goes hand in hand with the conviction that the Church of Christ exists fully and completely in the Roman Catholic Church. This balance and tension is something I will come back to in my in my conclusions. The key point in Vatican II is that the gifts God bestows in the church for its life and mission are fully present in the Catholic Church but not exclusively. With the Eastern Churches we share the same sacraments including crucially the sacrament of Order. With the

communities of the Reformation we share baptism and, of course, the scriptures. This situation the Catholic Church understands as one of real though imperfect communion between the Catholic Church and other Christians. The Secretariat – later Pontifical Council – for Christian Unity was tasked with setting up dialogues that would seek to enable the different churches and ecclesial communities to move from a situation of imperfect communion with the Catholic Church to that degree of shared faith that could be appropriately expressed in full sacramental sharing. What I think was never addressed explicitly, but was sometimes raised with me by my ecumenical partners, was the question that I have already referred to of the extent of doctrinal agreement that would be a sufficient basis for sacramental sharing.

Nonetheless, very serious work has been done and what I would like to do now is to illustrate the development and the potential of this agenda with three snapshot illustrations of bilateral relationships involving the Catholic Church, and also to look at what I see as some key issues that have emerged as the dialogues have progressed.

The first of my three isn't really a dialogue at all. It is a series of agreed statements of faith made at the highest level between the Catholic Church and three of the Ancient Oriental Churches. That is, of course, the name we give today to the Churches that separated from the rest of Christianity because they did not accept the Christological teaching of the Council of Chalcedon. It is a complex story but basically they did not accept that Christ was a divine person with a human nature and a divine nature. Clearly this is not the place to go into the substance of all this but simply to note that since the Second Vatican Council there have been agreed statements on Christology between popes and three of these churches – between Pope Paul VI and the Patriarch of the Coptic Church, between Pope John Paul II and the Patriarch of the Syrian Orthodox Church, and between Pope John Paul II and the Patriarch of the Armenian Church. In these statements the Pope and the Patriarchs of these Churches have articulated their faith in Christ without depending on the language of person and nature that was the bone of contention at the time of Chalcedon. With the Syrian Orthodox there was also provision for sacramental sharing in cases of special necessity. The point is that a landmark agreement was established but it has only had fairly limited effect on sacramental and structural relations.

Dialogue with these churches is the only one that I am currently actively engaged in. It was because of those agreed statements and against the background of an International Dialogue Commission that was set up subsequently that the Coptic Bishop Angaelos and I began a regional dialogue. It has been a fascinating experience but it has also made clear a very real issue in dialogue with churches with whom there has been a historic breach. Once there is a break in communion, differences are compounded. The issues are rarely purely theological

and with a break in communion comes differences in governance, spirituality, culture and so on. Ethnic and racial and political issues are a part of the story, and with these churches their distinctive identities have been unfolding for well over a thousand years in a situation of mutual estrangement vis-à-vis the Catholic Church. How, from that vantage point, can we now move towards unity – towards communion? Getting to know each other at local level is a start.

Let me turn to the Anglican-Roman Catholic International Commission – ARCIC – which was one of my main tasks in Rome. The first phase of this dialogue – and the one that is best known – considered Eucharist, Ministry and Authority. The reason for this choice is not hard to seek. Pope Leo XIII's Bull of 1896, *Apostolicae Curae*, had judged Anglican ordinations to be null and void. The principal reason for this was that the Edwardine ordinal of 1552 which was used for ordinations by the Church of England was judged to be defective in form and intention because its understanding of priesthood and of the mass was seen to be inconsistent with Catholic teaching on those matters. It was the hope of some that, if it could be established that Catholics and Anglicans can profess a united faith in those matters today, a major hurdle would have been overcome that might pave the way for some kind of reconciliation or mutual recognition of ministries. The Final Report of that first Commission claimed to have reached "substantial agreement" on Eucharist and Ministry and a degree of convergence on the question of Authority. It was a bold claim and it was not long after the publication of the Report that the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith published a set of Observations in which it basically said that the Commission, in claiming substantial agreement, had claimed too much too soon. Both the Observations and the critical reactions to them illustrate well the challenges involved in receiving and responding to ecumenical agreements.

This dialogue also raised sharply the question of whether it is in the theological dialogue that the real problems actually arise. I want here to pinpoint two issues about process and method that emerge from the experience of ecumenical dialogue, including those with the Eastern Churches and the Anglicans.

In 1980 Pope John Paul addressed the Second Anglican Roman Catholic Commission with words of encouragement and he gave his understanding of the methodology of ARCIC. He said:

Your method has been to go behind the habit of thought and expression born and nourished in enmity and controversy to scrutinise together the great common treasure, to clothe it in a language at once traditional and expressive of the insights an age which no longer glorifies in strife, but seeks to come together in listening to the quiet voice of the Spirit.

That is I think a very good and very open summary of the ecumenical method, but my question is: how much that method can actually

deliver? Certainly the dialogues that the Catholic Church has engaged in have not resulted in any kind of ecclesial reunion, but I wonder about the historical and hermeneutical issues that this process and method raises. Can we correct the past? It is a little bit like the question of apologising for the Crusades. Can we today “apologise” for the words and deeds of Pope Urban II and St Bernard of Clairvaux? Can we apologise for things that were said and done during the Reformation conflicts? If so, what does it change?

There is, however, another issue that the ARCIC process in particular raises, which I think takes us to the heart of the matter. It was during the Second ARCIC, when I was co-secretary that the Church of England passed the legislation for the ordination of women. I well remember Professor Henry Chadwick saying at an ARCIC meeting in Venice, “I can interpret transubstantiation. I can interpret infallibility. But I cannot interpret a woman.” What he was saying was that the conceptual and theological methodology of ecumenical dialogue can only go so far. It can only deal with certain kinds of Issues.

Interestingly, a similar but different issue arose with the Byzantine Orthodox dialogue that began in 1979. The early reports of that dialogue are excellent. Tillard’s theology of communion is explored beautifully to show how Catholics and Orthodox have a shared understanding of church and shared faith in the sacraments including the sacrament of Ordination. The problems arose when they went beyond discussing theological ideas and had to address the question of a real living people – in this case not a woman priest but the person of the pope and the bishops of the Eastern Rite Catholic Churches. It is not just about ideas.

Having flagged up those questions, let me conclude these snapshots of ecumenical dialogue with the Lutherans. The international dialogue between the Catholic Church and the Lutheran World Federation was and is a dialogue of great rigour and intellectual quality. It is also – exceptionally – a dialogue that was judged by both Catholic and Lutheran authorities to have successfully achieved its goal. In the words of William Rusch, one of the key figures in Catholic-Lutheran dialogue, “It declares that these churches [i.e. the Lutheran World Federation and the Catholic Church] are no longer in a church dividing dispute about the doctrine of justification and so the respective condemnations of the sixteenth century do not apply to the teaching either of the Roman Catholic Church or the Lutheran churches as presented in the Joint Declaration on the Doctrine of Justification”² Cardinal Cassidy, President of the Pontifical

² Paul D Murray ed. *Receptive Ecumenism and the Call to Catholic Learning* (OUP, 2008) p.156.

Council for Christian Unity echoed these sentiments saying that “the barrier has been removed from these fundamental understandings of the truth of justification which was at the very heart of the Reformation”³

The statements of the Lutheran-Catholic dialogue are of a somewhat different character from the ARCIC statements. They speak about “differentiated consensus” rather than “substantial agreement”. They also show a stronger awareness of the cultural and political importance of ecumenism. At the press conference in Augsburg that launched the agreement in 1999, there was a very clear recognition of how this agreement had importance beyond the churches themselves. The comments of Dr Ishmael Noko, General Secretary of the Lutheran World Federation are particularly poignant for Britain today. He said that the Declaration “carries a special message of peace for Europe, in view of the tensions regarding European “integration” both then [under the Holy Roman Empire] and now [through the European Union] . . . [but also] for the whole world “⁴.

As far as the ecumenical process itself is concerned, however, the Joint Declaration did not herald the restoration of ecclesial communion. In fact it once again raised very sharply this underlying question of what degree of agreement is required – particularly on the part of the Catholic Church – for the establishment of ecclesial communion.

These indications have been intended to illustrate the significant progress of ecumenism but also to highlight some questions and concerns. To bring this part of my paper to a conclusion, I want to mention the more recent emergence of what is called “receptive ecumenism”, which postdates my own involvement in international ecumenical dialogue, but I am guessing that part of the background to receptive ecumenism is the need to find a way forward that does not depend so heavily on the processes and presuppositions of earlier dialogues. In his introduction to the excellent 2008 volume of essays on receptive ecumenism, Paul Murray noted that some dialogues, especially the Catholic dialogues with the Anglicans and the Methodists “have moved beyond the attempt simply to bring differing languages traditionally regarded as incompatible into reconciled conversation, to exploring the more open and more explicitly receptive question as to what each tradition might in practice fruitfully have to learn from the other, and this in a way that enriches rather than compromises their respective integrities”⁵

³ John A Radano *Lutheran & Catholic Reconciliation on Justification* (William B Eerdmans, 2009) p.169.

⁴ *Ibid.*, p.169.

⁵ Murray, *op. cit.*, p.13.

It seems to me that the significance of this development is that it demonstrates that the process of ecumenical rapprochement is dynamic, many faceted, and always in need of reassessment.

Having considered some the issues that have emerged within the ecumenical process, this journey also needs to be reflected on in the light of the various factors that have impacted upon it since the 1910 World Conference on Mission and the 1964 Decree on Ecumenism. Some quite general points stand out. One, of course, is the various issues that come under the overall heading of “secularisation”. Ecumenism presupposes conviction about Christian faith and about the need for Christians to be one. That may be obvious to us but it is a recondite preoccupation to many, and an improbable exercise for those who see division as endemic in the world of religion. In the Catholic Church and elsewhere many sit much more loosely with their denominational identity than their parents or grandparents. Official ecumenism assumes a strong sense of denominational identity as a key ingredient for ecumenical dialogue. The term “post-denominationalism” has entered our vocabulary. It is a complex phenomenon but let me just give one example or manifestation of it. In my years as a parish priest most of the local Anglican clergy – with whom I got on extremely well - were Evangelical-Charismatic and had, I felt, a much greater affinity with members of other denominations who shared that identity than with fellow Anglicans who did not.

That brings me to a related point. In the Christian world, things are constantly changing. In those parts of the world that have been less affected by secularization, Pentecostalism is the dominant brand of Christianity and, although there have been significant dialogues between the Catholic Church and Pentecostal groups and churches, their mindset is not typically ecumenical. They tend not to be drawn to the World Council of Churches, which seems to them – and indeed to others – to be now much more focused on issues of justice, peace and the environment than on matters of faith and salvation, which is where their main focus lies. Cardinal Kasper homes in on this matter in his contribution to the receptive ecumenism volume. He talks about “Pentecostal and other charismatic movements and groupings premised on an immediate personal experience of the Spirit”⁶ That is where their focus lies. But this is part of a bigger story. Interest in “spirituality” – however exactly you define that word – is where the focus is in religious literature today. Kasper refers to this as a “Schleiermacher moment” - “Individuality, interiority, freedom of the Christian individual, personal conscience” are the preoccupations of people today and “The visible unity of the church, then, is no longer

⁶ *Ibid.*, p.80.

a matter of urgency.” So today it would seem that the energy lies in the search for spirituality rather than the search for Christian Unity and there is a cultural and sociological context for that development.

So let us move on to the growing importance of inter-religious dialogue within Catholicism. I moved from ecumenism to inter-religious dialogue simply by returning from Rome to the parish of Sparkhill in Birmingham, a mostly Muslim area where I and my Anglican colleagues had regular meetings with the local Imams. What I brought to those meetings was a body of very clear teaching on inter-religious relations that came both from the Second Vatican Council and the subsequent teaching of Pope John Paul II. In fact, I would say that the considerable body of teaching he left in this area is part of his legacy that is insufficiently recognised. I want to indicate the ways in which that teaching interacted with and impacted upon church teaching on ecumenism.

The second chapter of *Lumen Gentium* gives an inclusive view of the human community seeing all humanity as in some way ordered to the one People of God. Everyone is somehow caught up in the drama of salvation history. A related text is *Gaudium et Spes* 22: “For since Christ died for all and since all men are in fact called to one and the same destiny which is divine, we must hold that the Holy Spirit offers to all the possibility of being made partners, in a way known to God, in the paschal mystery.” Pope John Paul built on this teaching notably and significantly in his encyclical on the church’s missionary mandate *Redemptoris Missio*. He speaks of the grace received by people in other religions: “This grace comes from Christ; it is the result of his sacrifice and is communicated by the Holy Spirit. It enables each person to attain salvation through his or her own cooperation” (RM 10).

I suggest that the reason why this is important for ecumenism is that the key tool in ecumenical dialogue is the New Testament idea of *koinonia*, which literally means shared participation in a given reality. We translate it as “communion” and, as I have already indicated, in ecumenical dialogue it has been used to explore the different ways in which Christians of different traditions share in the Holy Spirit, which we all receive in the first place in baptism. It is clear from church teaching about other religions, however, that what we are talking about is not something that only Christians are caught up in. The pope invited leaders of other churches and other religions to pray together in Assisi in 1986 and although people of different religions did not pray together, the prayer of all was respected and was seen as prompted by the Holy Spirit. Addressing the Roman Curia later in the year Pope John Paul reflected on the Assisi Day and said, “We can indeed maintain that every authentic prayer is called forth by the Holy Spirit, who is mysteriously present in the

heart of every person.”⁷ In that address I find echoes of de Lubac and Rahner, theologians who paved the way for the Council, but it was Pope John Paul with his strong sense of responsibility for the whole human community who put those ideas to work. This does not compromise the specific significance of ecumenical dialogue but it does situate it in a broader context. I would add that in the world we live in today, dialogue with other religions is seen by many as having an urgency and a relevance for our modern world with all its conflicts and dangers. It is seen as the thing of the moment, which ecumenism is not.

There is one quite specific and very important way in which the question of other religions has impacted upon ecumenism and that is relations with the Jews. Conciliar teaching about the Jews is also teaching about Christianity and about the whole of Christianity. Drawing together the teaching of the Council and of Pope John Paul, we can say that our roots are in Judaism. God’s covenant with the Jews has not been revoked. We are connected with the Jews “intrinsicly” and at the level of “identity“. They are our elder brothers and sisters. Crucially, we look forward with the Jews to the final fulfilment of God’s promises. As divided Christians, we acknowledge that prior to the internal schisms within Christianity, we grew out of a schism with Judaism. Some would argue that Christians can and will only come together through our shared reclaiming of our common roots in Judaism and our sharing with them in eschatological hope – hope for the final fulfilment of the promises we find in the scriptures we share.

Needless to say, the opening up of this topic has a particular poignancy when it is raised in relation to Luther and the Reformation in Germany. In June 2016 the annual Cardinal Bea lecture that is organised by the Sisters of Sion in London was given jointly by a Rabbi and a Protestant Pastor from Germany. It focused, of course, on Luther’s antisemitism but the picture that emerged at the end of the questions was of Christians divided because of their inability to relate together to their shared origins in Judaism.

Engagement with Muslims and particularly with the eastern religions has a long and fruitful history going back long before the Second Vatican Council. We can mention Charles de Foucauld and Bede Griffiths. The point I wish to make, though, is that these experiences have a profound theological dimension. Theology is an organic discipline and ecumenical dialogue does not exist in isolation. Theology dies if it is compartmentalised in such a way that one branch has no living connection with other branches. The

⁷ Francesco Gioia (ed.) *Interreligious Dialogue. The Official Teaching of the Catholic Church 1963-95* (Pauline Books and Media 1997) p.366.

point I am making about *koinonia* is that although ecumenism is quite distinctive in its aims and methods, inter-religious dialogue does not occupy a completely separate space.

Let us now consider some of the ways in which the research of church historians raises questions about the ecumenical movement and provides a perspective on ecumenism that is rather different from that of ecumenical “practitioners”. I am concerned here specifically with western ecumenism and it is not my purpose to assess or critique these points of view. Rather I wish to illustrate the different kinds of interpretation of the Reformation and its aftermath that ecumenists need to bear in mind when seeking ways to heal the wounds of the Reformation.

Those directly involved in ecumenical dialogue typically accept the divisions within Christianity as a given but also as an anomalous situation that requires reconciliation and resolution. That is the mindset: the reality is that there just are – in Catholic terminology – different churches and ecclesial communities. Now what I find in some Catholic historians is a very strong sense of the tragedy of the Reformation – a sense of loss: spiritual, theological, moral and social. I find a mood that is different from the mood of the ecumenical dialogue and I feel it needs to be brought to bear on the ecumenical debate. I will illustrate this with some quotations. In addition I will refer to Alec Ryrie’s recent book *Protestants, The Radicals who made the Modern World*, which also raises questions about the ecumenical endeavour but from a very different perspective.

In *Reformation Divided*, Eamon Duffy refers to the American Catholic historian Brad Gregory and says that “the Protestant assault on the intellectual and moral underpinning of Catholic Christianity fatally if unintentionally undermined the coherence of the Western intellectual and moral tradition”⁸ So what happened and why? Brad Gregory in *The Unintended Reformation* pulls no punches and is quite clear about what happened. The Protestant principle of *sola scriptura*, which was intended to purify western Christianity in fact catastrophically undermined it.

The Reformation’s failure derived directly from the patent infeasibility of applying the Reformers own foundational principles. . . . The unintended problem created by the Reformation was therefore not simply a perpetuation of the inherited and still present challenge of how to make human life more genuinely Christian, but also the new and compounding problem of how to know what Christianity was. ‘Scripture alone’ was not a solution to this problem but its cause.⁹

⁸ Eamon Duffy, *Reformation Divided* (Bloomsbury 2017) p.3.

⁹ Brad S Gregory, *The Unintended Reformation* (Belknap Press of Harvard University Press 2012) p.368.

In Gregory's account the Reformation didn't and couldn't create a coherent and integrated type of Christianity to supersede the medieval church. Instead it created a multitude of conflicting and dissenting voices so that the only thing Protestants could agree on was their disagreement with the Catholics. Not only that but "the literally endless back-and-forth non-dialogue of theological controversialists in the Reformation era was a springboard for the secularisation of public discourse".¹⁰

Once the break with the Catholic Church had taken place there was never any chance of a new principle of unity emerging within the culture of the Reformation. What began to take shape instead was the process of secularisation. For Gregory, a key factor in this process was what he calls "metaphysical univocity." The discourse of Reformation polemics become a discourse in which God became a being among other beings, albeit the supreme being. By the seventeenth-century Gregory says that "God was an individual *ens*, an entity within being, or God was in some way coextensive with the totality of being. The entire category of God's actions in history had been unintentionally paralysed by doctrinal controversy"¹¹

What I think he is saying is that the hidden God, the God of mystery, the God we know in sign, in sacrament and in contemplation was eclipsed. What he also seems to be saying is that the God who was rejected by the philosophers of the Enlightenment, the God debunked in our own times by Richard Dawkins and Christopher Hitchens was the God who took shape at the Reformation. What seems to me to follow from this is that the heroes of this great crisis were those who fully understood and shared the concerns of the Reformers but who foresaw the terrible cost of breaking with the Catholic Church. Perhaps one even hears echoes of the contemporary political crisis in this country. The figure of Erasmus stands out as well as St Thomas More. Most ecumenists would agree that schisms damage everyone but for Gregory it is not just a matter of damage but of devastation.

Alec Ryrie, however, has a very different perspective. He sees Protestantism as rooted in a profound spiritual experience and in conscience, whether we are talking about Luther or Calvin, Wesley or Schleiermacher, or the Pentecostals. That is the source of its energy and life. It created a mass movement that is not united and was and is quarrelsome and diverse. He says it "helped to seed a great deal of what we now think of as purely secular: rationalism, capitalism, communism, democracy, political liberalism, feminism,

¹⁰ Ibid., p.376.

¹¹ Ibid., p.48.

pluralism”¹². He also says that “Protestantism has thrived most when it is most divided”.¹³ Ryrie would, I think, agree with some aspects of Gregory’s diagnosis. The difference is that Ryrie accepts it and sees it as positive and creative. To my mind western ecumenism in Ryrie’s analysis looks like a rather improbable exercise if its aim is the unity of all Christians. He says, for example, that the World Council of Churches is no nearer to achieving Christian Unity than the UN is to achieving world peace.

It is not my purpose to evaluate these historical analyses nor do I claim to have done them full justice. My point is that ecumenists need to take account of historical perspectives of this kind since they are an important and integral part of the story of ecumenism. I want to flag up those very different historical perspectives before moving toward some concluding reflections.

In order to do that I want to go back to the Council and to a too-little-known encyclical of Pope Paul VI, *Ecclesiam Suam*, which was written during the Council in 1964. This encyclical provided the basis for the Council’s teaching. In it Pope Paul develops an understanding of the church in terms of dialogue. Divine revelation is precisely a dialogue and dialogue is what the church does – in teaching, in preaching and in mission. He uses the image of concentric circles with the Catholic Church at the centre to explain the role and profile of the church in the world. The church, he says, must be in dialogue with the non-believing world. At that time he was referring to the communist bloc. Today it is much bigger and more widespread than that. In the western world, it is the air we breathe. That is Pope Paul’s outer circle. The next circle are the other religions, then the Jews, and the circle closest to the Catholic Church is that occupied by other Christians. “To this internal drive of charity which seeks expression in the external gift of charity, We will apply the word ‘dialogue’” (64).

He makes it clear, however, that in presenting this vision he is in no way compromising the claims of the Catholic Church. Indeed it is precisely because the Catholic Church sees itself as “the sacrament or instrumental sign of intimate unity with God and of unity for the whole human race” that it has the responsibility to be the source and agent of dialogue.

It seems to me that in the years since the Council the role and profile of the Catholic Church in the world has developed profoundly because of that agenda and that self-understanding. The Assisi Day that I referred to is a kind of icon of the role of the Catholic Church in the world today. The Pope invited Christian leaders and leaders of other religions to come together to pray for peace. After that event

¹² Alec Ryrie, *Protestants, The Radicals who made the Modern World* (William Collins 2017) p.455.

¹³ *Ibid.*, p.456.

Archbishop Robert Runcie, the then Archbishop of Canterbury, said that only one Church and only one person could have convened that gathering. More recently when Pope Francis invited President Shimon Perez and President Mahmood Abbas – a Jew and a Muslim – to pray with him in the Vatican, no-one saw it as in any way remarkable. That is what the Pope is for. And so it is when the Pope prays with the Ecumenical Patriarch or the Archbishop of Canterbury.

Lumen Gentium says that all people are called to the Catholic unity of the people of God. “It is the sign which precedes and promotes universal peace” (LG 13). It has to be that sign for all people, all believers and all Christians. In his Introduction to a recent volume called *A Global History of Catholicism*,¹⁴ Eamon Duffy says, “But if Catholics themselves have often been tempted to measure the Church’s success in terms of worldly influence, at its deepest reality the Church is not a power but a sign, the sacrament of the presence of a merciful God at the heart of suffering humanity.” Our world, our continent and our country are all places that are experiencing hostility and division. In that situation the Catholic Church must be a source and centre of peace and reconciliation. I think Pope John Paul understood very profoundly the role of the church as it has matured and developed since Vatican II. In our time I think this is seen and acknowledged in the way people of all religions and none respond to the person and the profile of Pope Francis.

It is in that self-understanding that the Catholic Church’s irrevocable commitment to Christian Unity is rooted. The goal may seem very far off but that is not the point. It is not for us to know “times and seasons” so talk of an “ecumenical winter” is misplaced. The ecumenical agenda is now part of the DNA of Catholicism. It is fundamental to the church’s outreach and mission. It may be that “concentric circles” is not the best image but it is certainly an attempt to paint the right picture. Ecumenism, then, is an integral part of a bigger programme and a bigger story. It is part of a narrative that also includes the search for peace between religions and peace in the world. That is the *status quaestionis* of ecumenism. It is an expression and an exploration of the very identity of Catholicism and that is the perspective in which we join in marking the five hundredth anniversary of the Reformation.

Archbishop Kevin McDonald
Archbishop Emeritus of Southwark

¹⁴ *The Global History of Catholicism*, published for the Lord Brennan Educational Trust by Rowan Publishing, p.12.