

## An ecumenical response

# Taking off our sandals before the 'holy ground' of the other

## Callan Slipper

*The author is an Anglican priest and theologian. In 2017, he became the Church of England's National Ecumenical Officer. He serves on the editorial board of Claritas, Journal of Dialogue and Culture and is a member of the Focolare Movement's international, interdisciplinary study Centre, the Abba School.*

Sexual scandals are not exclusive to the Roman Catholic Church. All churches are suffering from the same horror. When Piero Coda faces up to the issue of paedophilia, as Pope Francis has already done, and before him Pope Benedict XVI, he touches upon a challenge that is common throughout the Christian world. Clergy in the highest positions and charismatic people in all the churches have fallen: we are all involved.

This, I think, is the first thing that needs to be said by other churches in response to the agony currently experienced by the Roman Catholic Church: we are like you; we suffer from the same illnesses. And we can, indeed, learn from how you respond, even though the forms taken by 'sexual abuse, the abuse of power and the abuse of conscience'<sup>1</sup> are not the same in our churches.

But perhaps a further word of consolation can be offered. There is a light shining in the darkness we have all been plunged into, and it makes us realize how in the midst of this crisis God is present and at work: we are obliged to review our theologies and our structures. Perhaps we have trusted too much in human beings; perhaps we have forgotten that any human person must struggle with the temptation to do evil; perhaps we have left too much power in the hands of just a few. But one thing is certain. We must recognize that no one is without sin and that only in the crucified and forsaken Jesus do we have salvation. It is there that we must return and reflect theologically and renew our structures upon this basis, the only solid one.

Because the Church, and each church, while overflowing with holiness both in lives of individuals and communities, on the one hand, and in the means of grace, on the other, remains always – always – also a hospital for sinners.

And this urges upon us some fascinating ecumenical insights. In first place, it is only humble churches that can unite. Losing every possibility of triumphalism, every sense of superiority, is a prerequisite for any church that wishes to grow in unity with others. But still more, once made humble, the churches can meet and learn from one another. This is fertile ground for what is called 'Receptive Ecumenism'.

It can be seen at work in the first published document of the Third Anglican Roman Catholic

---

<sup>1</sup> Letter of His Holiness Pope Francis to the People of God (20 August 2018) quoted by Piero Coda.

International Commission (ARCIC III),<sup>2</sup> from June 2018, which used the method of 'Receptive Ecumenism', adapted to what ARCIC termed 'receptive learning'. While not looking specifically at the problems put into light by abuse scandals, it looks at highly pertinent topics such as, for instance, the question of synodality. Piero Coda, in his article, shows how the lack of synodality, and specifically the lack of involvement of laypeople in decision-making processes, generates problems in church life by creating the conditions for clericalism to give rise to abuse. ARCIC III indicates that the ecclesial experience of the Anglican Communion can throw light upon the practice of synodality. And, on the other hand, it also indicates that the Roman Catholic Church's ecclesial experience offers a model of life that, focused on the person of the Pope and in the full communion among all local churches, has structures of unity that can inspire a deeper life of unity among Anglican churches.

It is in this context, it seems to me, that we can see the timeliness of Coda's emphasis upon the 'mysticism of us' and the 'culture of encounter'. Synodality is about walking together (as commended by the ARCIC III document title: *Walking Together on the Way*). Everything, including the deepening of unity useful for Anglicans, points to this life of relations in God lived together, which then unfurls in living for everyone and working for the transformation of society - in other words, *mission*, something that is much at heart for all the churches. Which is to say: 'us in God' lived by Christians becomes the possibility of an 'us' that is more authentic and fully human, reaching into all aspects of human life.

Especially here we can see the need for a spirituality that is 'fit for purpose', so as to avoid the illusion of thinking the Church can be healed merely by structural and theological changes. This spirituality brings about the 'personal and communal conversion that makes us see things as the Lord does', as demanded by Pope Francis and underlined by Coda. And this conversion is, at root, a matter of 'taking off our sandals before the "holy ground" of the other'.

---

<sup>2</sup> *Walking Together on the Way: Learning to Be the Church – Local, Regional, Universal, An Agreed Statement of the Third Anglican–Roman Catholic International Commission (ARCIC III), Erfurt 2017.*