

## Receptive Ecumenism: A Path of Unity

# How to dialogue?

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*There are various expressions of dialogue between the Churches: from theological dialogue to common prayer and joint commitment to the service of society. At the heart of all there cannot fail to be the dialogue of life, which means mutual acceptance and reciprocal gift, and which makes us experience the living presence of Christ who gathers his own into one and makes them his Body. The author is an Anglican priest and was until 2022 nationally responsible for the ecumenical relations of the Church of England.*

In a famous piece of writing, "If we are united, Jesus is among us", Chiara Lubich affirms that this is the hour of Jesus in the midst of people gathered together (cf. Mt 18:20):

It is he who, inspiring his saints with his eternal truths, makes history in every age. This too is his hour: not so much the hour of a saint but of him, of *him among us*, of him living in us as we build up – in the unity of love – his Mystical Body and the Christian community.<sup>1</sup>

What a gift for the world this is! In this very moment, in a world torn apart by bloodshed, dissension, and criminality on a global scale, Jesus can be present and act for the good of humanity. With Jesus in our midst, the Church is, in the here and now, the instrument of God's outstretched arms of love.

The tragedy is that this united Church exists mostly in prophetic experiences. Despite the many historic advances in reconciliation among Christians, at the moment our divisions make it impossible for us to reach anything like our full potential really to be the living body of Christ. It is as if we were a large rose window, one of those windows sparkling with multicolored glass that you find in some large churches, stunningly beautiful when the sun shines through. But with our divisions that window is broken, its pieces scattered on the ground. Each piece is indeed still beautiful, but all lack the splendor they would have if joined together and were back in place where the light can stream through.

And the world needs that light. It longs for Christ.

### A style of dialogue

Against this background, I would like to speak of a style of dialogue that is increasingly used as the Churches grow together ecumenically. It is called *receptive ecumenism*.

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<sup>1</sup> Commentary on the Word of Life: "Your eye is the lamp of your body. If your eye is pure, your whole body is full of light," Lk 11:34. Novembre 1949, *Paradise '49*, 897-898. Cf. Chiara Lubich, *Essential Writings*, New York: New City Press and London: New City, 2006, p.102.

Receptive ecumenism began to be explored in 2003 with the arrival of Paul Murray at the Catholic Studies Centre of the University of Durham. The university website says: "The essential principle behind Receptive Ecumenism is that the primary ecumenical responsibility is to ask not "What do the other traditions first need to learn from us?" but "What do we need to learn from them?"<sup>2</sup>

It is deceptively simple. It has been found fruitful in several official dialogues. For instance, the Third Anglican Roman Catholic International Commission (ARCIC III), used it in the largest of its documents so far, called *Walking Together on the Way*. This document says of ecumenism:

We suggest that the current twofold task, as we seek to walk the way towards full communion, is (i) to look humbly at what is not working effectively *within one's own tradition*, and (ii) to ask whether this might be helped by receptive learning from the understanding, structures, practices, and judgements of the other.<sup>3</sup>

## Two attitudes to take

This asks us to do two things. The first is *an act of profound humility*. We recognize our need to learn. In this we find that all the things that we tend to be ashamed of, our defects and difficulties, are our friends. They show us our need to learn. As divided Christian communities, therefore, we can look the problems in our own traditions in the face without fear. How necessary this is in an age of abuse scandals, institutional cover-ups, authoritarian misuse of power, in-fighting, and ethical and doctrinal confusion!

The second thing is that we are asked *to learn from others*. Within the whole body of Christ there are the gifts we need for our healing. The ARCIC document says:

We must explore what God has given to our partners which, as Pope Francis has said, "is also meant to be a gift for us" (EG §246). This is particularly so when such "treasure[s] to be shared" address difficulties in one's own tradition.<sup>4</sup>

Through receiving the gifts we find in other traditions, our own Churches can grow in the life of Christ. As we come closer together, we become spiritually more alive. And, of course, as we grow in Christ, we become more united.

## Readiness to learn and sharing of gifts

Each of these two pillars of receptive ecumenism is reflected in the charism of unity. Our humility finds a decisive model in Jesus Forsaken, as Chiara Lubich wrote in 1949:

It is necessary to put ourselves before everyone in an attitude of learning, for we really have something to learn. And only nothingness gathers all into itself and clasps to itself each thing in unity: it is necessary to be nothing (Jesus Forsaken) before each brother or sister in order to clasp *Jesus* to ourselves in them.<sup>5</sup>

This readiness to learn from each person, in the practice of receptive ecumenism, opens a way of genuine dialogue among Churches. It is also an essential attitude for developing love among Christians. It is love that makes us able to enter into a deeper communion when the

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<sup>2</sup> <<https://www.durham.ac.uk/research/institutes-and-centres/catholic-studies/research/constructive-catholic-theology/receptive-ecumenism/>>

<sup>3</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, Section III, 78.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid*, Section I, 17.

<sup>5</sup> 28 August 1949, *Paradise '49*, 540.

second pillar of receptive ecumenism, the sharing of gifts, takes effect. As Chiara said in 1997, during the Second European Ecumenical Assembly in Graz, when speaking about a spirituality for reconciliation at the service of ecumenism:

Love and mutual love, therefore, between Christians and mutual love between the Churches. That love which leads to putting everything in common, each one becoming a gift to the others, so that we can foresee in the Church of the future that one and only one will be the truth, but expressed in various ways, observed from various angles, enriched by many interpretations.<sup>6</sup>

### **A threefold pattern**

Receptive learning, which is at the heart of receptive ecumenism, is in fact a spiritual discipline of conversion. It is more than just a methodology. Rather, it is an attitude of welcome in our approach to each other, a way of thinking, taking place in relational encounters. It has three moments.

In its first moment, it begins, as we have seen, with a *recognition* of reality: we have a lot to learn. This honesty is a conversion to humility and already changes our relationships. We cannot be harsh, judgmental, or too quick to teach. This is in no sense to deny any of the gifts there may be in each of us, just as among Churches there is no need to deny any of the spiritual, doctrinal, ministerial, liturgical, institutional, or practical gifts that exist in each specific Christian communion. But we need to be realistic and acknowledge our frailty. We come to the party, as it were, just as we are.

Next there is the *reception* of the gifts of the other. It is above all an attitude of appreciation for all the good the other brings. This appreciation together with our self-awareness channels our approach to the other away from merely instrumentalizing them as a means for self-improvement. It is a practice of respect that welcomes the other as other, seeking to perceive their gifts. It is a look of love. Of course, such a love can only be a gift from the Holy Spirit. It too is a moment of conversion.

The conversion intensifies in the third moment of receptive learning, which can be called *restoration*. We engage in restoration when we take what we have learned and apply it in our own lives or, among Churches, within our own communion, in ways suitable to the integrity of our identity. Among Churches, given that all Christian communions belong to the one body of Christ, whatever riches exist in any part of that body in principle belongs to all and so receiving these gifts is, in fact, restoring something that belongs to those who receive. More than likely in some way, perhaps undeveloped and unrecognized, the gifts already exist in those who learn, but they are now found afresh, with greater understanding. In any case, it is a conversion that respects our identity, indeed it makes us more authentically ourselves.

### **Receptive Learning & Mission**

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<sup>6</sup> Chiara Lubich, *Una spiritualità per la riconciliazione*, discorso alla Seconda assemblea ecumenica europea, Graz, Austria, 23 June 1997 <<https://www.focolare.org/1997/06/23/una-spiritualita-per-la-riconciliazione/>> (my translation).

Possibly one of the most attractive things about receptive ecumenism is that it points to a receptive learning that applies beyond the internal dialogue of Christians among themselves. It is fruitful for mission. We can approach others who do not have faith in Christ 1) knowing we always have a lot to learn, 2) ready to appreciate their gifts, and 3) willing to change in the light of what we learn. This threefold conversion liberates love in us. But it is also an invitation to the others to do likewise. They are made able 1) to relate to us just as they are, without needing to put on a good face, 2) to appreciate our gifts, which are above all the riches of the gospel, Christ in us, and 3) to apply those gifts in their own lives according to the integrity of their own identity.

This approach, although it is not the only way to evangelize, has enormous potential because it is respectful of Jesus in us and of Jesus in those we meet. And it is rooted in Jesus crucified and forsaken, to whom we bear witness right from the start with our radical openness and acceptance of the other.

It is also consoling that receptive mission, as it could be called, can be practiced by imperfect persons or Churches. A seminal Anglican document, *Mission-shaped Church*<sup>7</sup> at one point quotes a theological statement from the Church of England's House of Bishops which asserts that the Church is more than a voice speaking about divine things but is rather the living experience of them, making the powerful and beautiful claim:

The church does more than merely point to a reality beyond itself. By virtue of its participation in the life of God, it is not only a sign and instrument, but also a genuine foretaste of God's Kingdom, called to show forth visibly, in the midst of history, God's final purposes for humankind.<sup>8</sup>

But an awareness of the facts means that *Mission-shaped Church* immediately goes on to say:

As such it [the Church] is always incomplete. The inevitable weakness and sinfulness of the Church at any particular time cannot simply be excused, but it is, through God's grace, the place where forgiveness and the power for a change of life can be seen and experienced.<sup>9</sup>

Receptive learning copes very well with the double nature of Christian experience: both the lofty gifts of grace and the struggle we all have of living up to it, both holiness and failure. Such learning takes us beyond superficial relationships and, together with others, enables us to discover wonderful and transformative things.

## Our Opportunity

What is more, each of us in our everyday lives can enter into "receptive" relationships, free to acknowledge the truth of our experience in all its dimensions and, at the very same time, to discover the beauties that exist in everyone. In this genuine meeting of love we will experience the presence of Jesus among us and, with him, we will revive the body of Christ, the one Church to which we all belong, in its vocation of service to humanity.

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<sup>7</sup> The Archbishops' Council, *Mission-shaped Church: Church Planting and Fresh Expressions of Church in a Changing Context* (London Church House Publishing, 2004).

<sup>8</sup> *Mission-shaped Church*, p. 95 note 62

<sup>9</sup> *Mission-shaped Church*, p. 96.

- <sup>1</sup> Commentary on the Word of Life: "The eye is the lamp of your body. If your eye is pure, your whole body will be enlightened" (*Lk* 11:34). November 1949, *Paradise* '49, cpv 897-898. Cf. C. Lubich, *The Spiritual Doctrine*, Città Nuova, Rome 2006, p. 161.
- <sup>2</sup> <<https://www.durham.ac.uk/research/institutes-and-centres/catholic-studies/research/constructive-catholic-theology-/receptive-ecumenism/>>
- <sup>3</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, Section III, 78. English translation: *Walking together on the road*, [https://iarccum.org/archive/ARCIC3/2018\\_ARCIC-III\\_Camminare-insieme-sulla-strada\\_II-Regno-2019-01\\_it.pdf](https://iarccum.org/archive/ARCIC3/2018_ARCIC-III_Camminare-insieme-sulla-strada_II-Regno-2019-01_it.pdf). This translation has been slightly revised. Italics in original.
- <sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, 17.
- <sup>5</sup> 28 August 1949, *Paradiso* '49, cpv 540.
- <sup>6</sup> Chiara Lubich, *A Spirituality for Reconciliation*, Address to the Second European Ecumenical Assembly, Graz (Austria), 23 June 1997 <<https://www.focolare.org/1997/06/23/una-spiritualita-per-la-riconciliazione/>>
- <sup>7</sup> The Archbishops' Council, *Mission-shaped Church: Church Planting and Fresh Expressions of Church in a Changing Context*, Church House Publishing, London 2004.
- <sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 95.
- <sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 96.