



## The Bishop of Ebbsfleet's Pastoral Letter – January 2010

### Christian Unity

**T**HINGS SEEM simple to a child. I remember as a boy wondering how all those car exhausts could emit fumes without poisoning the atmosphere. I wondered too why men and women were not treated equally – with women often being paid less and having to do the housework when they got home from work, as my mother did. I wondered also about Christian Unity, a major theme for January. Why were we so intent on making the Church one when anybody could see that we would be far better off lowering out sights and going first for two churches, one Catholic and the other Protestant?

There are, in fact, two competing and compelling visions for Christian Unity. The Catholic vision is of organic unity, Christians united in one Church. Bishops, priests and deacons would all be in communion with one another, and the baptised would be able to receive Holy Communion wherever they are and wherever they went. Such a Church would need to be agreed about Scripture, Creeds, Ministry and Sacraments, (the so-called 'Lambeth Quadrilateral' agreed in 1888). Sadly, we Anglicans – whose formula that is – have been the very ones to alter Ministry and Sacraments. We have admitted women to Holy Orders, despite warnings from Catholics and Orthodox that this development is not permissible. American Anglicans, and our close friends the Swedish Lutherans, with whom we are in communion, have even proceeded to suggest that two people of the same sex may celebrate the sacrament of marriage. Elsewhere others have used substitutes for wheat bread and fermented grape juice and there have been lay people presiding at the Eucharist, or suggestions from the diocese of Sydney in Australia that they should. Some American Episcopalians – our fellow Anglicans – admit the unbaptised and those of other religions to Holy Communion. In short, the Catholic vision of unity is in some disrepair.

The Protestant vision seems to start off with a much bigger disadvantage: there are literally thousands of Protestant denominations. How could they ever be one? In their favour, however, there is the belief that structures are unimportant. The real Church of Jesus Christ an invisible Church, they say, whose members are known to God alone. To this invisible Church belong all who confess their faith in Jesus as Lord, and trust in his redeeming love. It is a good start and makes all those meetings about areas and jurisdictions and structures rather a waste of time. And yet, does it really bring Christians together, or do we all go on in our own sweet way, duplicating administration, wasting resources, competing unnecessarily, the strong flourishing and the weak dying off?

I think my childhood instincts were right. We should be doing something about carbon emissions. We should be working for men and women to be treated with equal value, despite their obvious and basic differences of biology, their function and role in the home, in the Church, and in society at large. We should be looking for different kinds of Christian unity, Catholic and Protestant, organic and confessional.

May the prayers of Our Lady of Walsingham, St Therese and John Henry Newman assist us as we seek to discover and build unity in the Church of Jesus Christ.

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