

Overcoming Discord in the Church

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In some parts of the world, the church is deeply fragmented. This is acutely the case in some European countries such as Holland and Austria, and in some countries in Latin America. And I don't know why, but I think it is most acutely felt in the United States, more than anywhere else. There have always been tensions within the church. This is necessary and healthy. But I have the impression that it has reached a stage when we have an urgent obligation to heal these divisions. A young American theologian, Christopher Ruddy, wrote, "Polarization is a luxury which the church can no longer indulge or even tolerate. ... Polarization has strangled the church's ability to be genuinely evangelical or missionary."

I devoted two chapters in my latest book, *What is the Point of Being a Christian?*, which was published earlier this year, to healing divisions in the church. My core thesis in the book is this: We usually think of this polarization in terms of the dichotomy of left and right, progressive and conservative. But these categories are alien to Catholic thinking. They derive from the Enlightenment. The Enlightenment philosophers believed that the light had dawned because they had cast off the darkness of tradition, and especially of Catholic dogma. They liberated themselves from the past. But this supposes an opposition between tradition and innovation which is alien to Catholicism. It is the tradition that we have received, the Gospels, St. Paul, the great theologians of the past, who always renew us and provoke fresh insights. St. Thomas Aquinas (I have to bring him in, I know it's my duty as a Dominican) who was one of the most creative theologians ever, would have been absolutely astonished if you had said to him that he was somehow against the tradition. The Second Vatican Council, for example, was a moment of incredible newness, and simultaneously a return to the Gospels and the theology of the early church.

So what's happened is we have allowed ourselves to become prisoners of other people's ways of thinking. We have to, as Catholics, claim our own categories. So how are we to describe this division? I opted for the terms Kingdom Catholics and Communion Catholics. I want to make the case that we need both.

By Kingdom Catholics, I mean those of us who have a deep sense of the church as the pilgrim people of God, on the way to the kingdom. The theologians who have been central for this tradition have been people like the Jesuit Karl Rahner, and the Dominicans Edward Schillebeeckx and Gustavo Gutiérrez. This tradition stresses openness to the world, finding the presence of the Holy Spirit working outside the church, freedom and the pursuit of justice. They became very much identified with a publication called *Concilium*.

By Communion Catholics I mean those who came, after the council, to feel the urgent need to rebuild the inner life of the church. They went with theologians like Hans von Balthasar and the then Joseph Ratzinger. Their theology often stressed Catholic identity, was wary of too hearty an embrace of modernity, and they stressed the cross. They had their publication. It was called *Communio*.

Of course, all this is a bit of a caricature. I am able to go into a more nuanced analysis in my book. Most of us will feel some attraction to both of these traditions, but will probably feel a primary identification with one or the other. We will only heal the divisions if we stretch our imaginations open to understand why the others think and feel as they do. Before we can talk, we must sympathize, and feel how it is that their way of understanding the church offers them a home, a place in which to be at peace.

Both are suffering

Both Kingdom and Communion Catholics are suffering from what Mindy Thomson Fullilove calls “root shock” in her book of the same title. She was describing the traumatic experience for black communities of enduring the destruction of their neighborhoods. Millions of black people found not just their houses destroyed in the name of urban development, but their communities dispersed. So root shock is the loss of home. Fullilove writes that “root shock is the traumatic stress reaction to the destruction of all or part of one’s emotional ecosystem. ... Root shock undermines trust, increases anxiety about letting loved ones out of one’s sight, destabilizes relationships, destroys social, emotional and financial resources, and increases the risk for every kind of stress-related disease, from depression to heart attack. Root shock leaves people chronically cranky, barking distinctive, croaky complaints that their world was abruptly taken away.” One of the effects of root shock is that you want to live with people like you. You become suspicious and nervous about people who are different. I argue that all Catholics, especially those in the United States, are suffering from root shock.

Both Kingdom and Communion Catholics find their sense of being at home in the church threatened and undermined. Kingdom Catholics were filled with joy by the Vatican Council, and felt themselves to be on the way to a deeply renewed and less clerical church, which would be a sign of hope and liberation. But as the years went by, they often felt disappointed and betrayed. The church was not turning out to be the home they had hoped for. And Communion Catholics also felt betrayed. They endured the loss of beloved traditions, ways of celebrating the liturgy, a sense of a Catholic world. Nuns threw away their habits, and it seemed that you could believe and do whatever you liked. And so both blamed the other side for destroying our home. And this produced just the anger and insecurity that Fullilove described. Each side blames the other for their exile, and that produces anger and frustration.

So the first thing that we must do is to get some feel of the loss of home that “the other side” feels. We must get some sense of their pain in exile. Secondly, we need to grasp that the church needs both parties if it is to flourish.

Both understandings of what it means to find a home in the church are present at the Last Supper. On that night Jesus shared with his disciples his body and his blood. And I argue in my book that it is vital to see the difference between the words of the bread and the words over the wine. It differs slightly in each of the synoptic Gospels, but the thrust is the same.

The bread is given to the disciples. "This is my body, given for you." The sharing of Christ's body gathers the community together around the altar. This is the community of Christ's small band of friends, who have shared his life and now his death. But the cup of wine is blessed for "you and for all," as it says in the Eucharist. This is the cup that Jesus will not drink again until the Kingdom. It looks forward to when the whole of humanity will be gathered into communion in Christ.

Working in all people

So the sharing of the bread is centripetal, one might say. It gathers us into the community of Christ's friends and disciples. It is a sign of that interior life of the church which is so crucial for Communion Catholics. But the cup of wine is centrifugal. It expresses that outward thrust which is important for Kingdom Catholics, the reaching out to all humanity, ready to find the Holy Spirit working in all people.

The central sacrament of the church, the sign of our shared home, then has this double rhythm. It gathers in and reaches out. It is like breathing. We breathe in and we breathe out. If we just emptied our lungs or just filled them, then we would die! We need both if we are to live, just as the church needs a fruitful and living tension between Kingdom and Communion Catholics. I believe that it is a tension which is present in the very name of our church, Roman Catholic. Roman stresses the clear identity that we have, in communion with the see of Rome, an identifiable community, with its particular ways of talking and praying. Catholic stresses the outreach for what is universal, and which can be impatient with too secure and fixed an identity.

This tension has always been present in the church. It is, one might suggest, the tension between Matthew's Gospel and Luke's, between Peter and Paul. It is present today still. We need to live this tension happily and fruitfully, and not as a battle to the death. And that means that we have to dialogue.

Conversation

Let's begin with a basic objection to my whole project of dialogue. When Cardinal Joseph Bernardin began the Common Ground Initiative, his aim was to create a space for dialogue, in which the different groups within the church could talk to each other. But many of his fellow cardinals rejected it from the beginning. The message seems to have been that if we disagree about fundamental truths of the faith, then there is no need to dialogue, since we already know what is the teaching of the church. And if we disagree on what is not fundamental, then what need is there for dialogue anyway, since people are free to believe what they wish? Dialogue is a liberal sort of idea anyway, and so to

make dialogue a priority is to opt for the agenda of those who I have called Kingdom Catholics.

In a lecture which John Allen of the *National Catholic Reporter* gave earlier this year in Washington on the spirituality of communion, he said, “In the first place, dialogue is a term with political baggage, because it has come to be seen as a characteristic virtue of the left. At the level of popular perception, liberals talk about dialogue, conservatives about truth. Whether that’s fair or accurate is, for the moment, beside the point. In some Catholic circles, pleas for ‘dialogue’ are believed to mask a relativism in which one theological or ecclesiological stance is considered as good as another, so the aim is simply for everyone to ‘get along,’ rather than to establish which positions cohere with the faith that comes from the apostles and which don’t. As a result, the term ‘dialogue’ is by now ideologically charged and therefore unhelpful.”

I would like to stand up for dialogue. It is not just a trendy liberal idea. It lies at the very roots of the Western intellectual tradition. Perhaps the most influential texts from the ancient world are Plato’s dialogues, and Plato was anything but a wishy-washy liberal. Pagan philosophers like Seneca and Marcus Aurelius wrote dialogues and Christians followed their example. The Acts of the Apostles describes Paul as literally dialoguing with people left, right and center. St. Justin Martyr wrote dialogues in the second century, as did St. Anselm of Canterbury in the 12th century. If traditionalist Catholics dismiss the whole idea of dialogue as a trendy liberal idea, then it simply shows that they do not know the tradition. But if one is going to get dialogue going, then one has to be very sensitive to how people hear words, and there is no point in getting things off to a bad start. So let’s try another word, conversation.

Conversation is a beautiful word. Its original meaning was “to live together,” “to share a life.” This hangs on in the English legal term “criminal conversation,” which means to have an illegal sexual relationship, not telling dirty jokes! Conversation came to mean talking to each other in the 16th century, because it is by talking to each other that we build community. A shared life means shared words. So the church is held in unity by the millions of conversations that cross theological boundaries and which heal divisions.

This is one of the ways in which we find our place in the life of the Trinity. The Trinity is the Father speaking the Word, which is the Son, and their shared sending forth of the Spirit. Indeed Christoph Schwöbel, a German theologian, has said that “God is conversation.”

Talking about the truths

What about the objection that we do not need to talk about the fundamental truths of our faith? They are, after all, defined. But we need to go on talking about even the basic dogmas of the faith. We need to go on thinking about them, arguing about them, trying to find new ways to express them. To think otherwise would be to fall into a very modern and fundamentalist understanding of faith, which thinks that you can get the truth wrapped up neatly in a few formulae and stop thinking.

Every great theologian has known that one hangs on to the tiniest glimpse of the mystery of God by going on talking. It is true that the church has, for example, defined the Resurrection of Christ as part of our faith. A Catholic cannot just drop that from his or her faith. But we will never cease from struggling to understand what that means. We will always be wrestling with the Gospel, like Jacob wrestling with the angel who is God, to obtain a blessing. We shall never stop trying out new hypotheses, challenging other people's way of expressing the faith, searching for new metaphors, until we see God face to face. Think of Thomas Aquinas. As a Dominican I often do! He wrote hundreds of thousands of words, and the fruit of all those words was to glimpse the mystery beyond all words. And so he exclaimed that all he had written was but straw. But if he had not struggled to write, then he would never have had that moment of revelation.

As T.S. Eliot wrote in the *Four Quartets*:

There is only the fight to recover what
has been lost
And found and lost again and again:
and now, under conditions
That seem unpropitious. But perhaps
neither gain nor loss.
For us, there is only the trying. The
rest is not our business.

So discussing our faith, putting questions, arguing with each other, debating, is not a wishy-washy liberal activity, whereas a faithful Catholic just accepts what is given. From the beginning, the church has needed this dialogue -- let us call it conversation -- to help us draw near to the mystery of God which is beyond words. God, of course, is the mystery beyond words, wrapped in silence. But that silence does not mean that we do not need words. As Schwöbel said, it is a silence between our words. Our words make a space for the silence that speaks.

So dialogue -- oops, I mean conversation -- is not part of a liberal agenda. It is not alternative to adhering to the truth. It belongs to the way in which we hang on to the truth in its fullness. It is through talking together, especially with those with whom we disagree, that we build a home for God, the God who is the eternal conversation of the Trinity. So how are we to do that?

First of all we have to stop being afraid of each other. Our home in the church seems threatened. It is neither the people of God on pilgrimage to the Kingdom, of which some Catholics dream, nor is it anymore the solid institution for which others hope. And we see other Catholics as menacing our home. For some Catholics any mention of Opus Dei, or Mother Angelica or the Legionaries of Christ produces a frisson of horror. The sight of a deep clerical collar and a biretta can make one panic. (I had thought of wearing a biretta for these lectures, just to see the reactions!) These are just the sort of people who are seen as turning the church around, undermining our dreams of renewal. To those of you who feel that I say: Do not be afraid. God has promised the Kingdom. We are on the way there. We do not know how or when it will come, but one day all injustice and oppression

will be ended and we shall rejoice in the perfect freedom of Christ. We will reach the home for which we long, even though every bishop in the world belonged to Opus Dei.

I was young and longhaired

Communion Catholics can also be free of all fear. They may see menace in every liberated feminist nun, in every bearded and sandaled priest. A copy of the *National Catholic Reporter* brings on the trembles. When I was a young and longhaired priest in my late 20s, I remember being scornfully told by a grand woman: “You do not look like a priest.” To which I could only reply, “Which particular priest don’t I look like?” But to those Catholics, we too can say: Do not be afraid. The church is not about to crumble. Even though every bishop in the world was a hippie, the church will survive. Forty years after the Council of Nicea in the fourth century most of the bishops were Arian, but the church did not collapse. Jesus said to Peter, “Thou art Peter, and on this rock I will build my church, and the powers of death shall not prevail against it.” To see one’s fellow Catholics, whether of the so-called left or right, as an ultimate threat to one’s home is a failure of faith.

If we look at each other without fear, then we may give each other recognition. In many African societies the traditional greeting is “I see you.” When you are at home in a community, then you know that you are seen. Women often complain of the pain of feeling that within the church they are invisible in our great patriarchal institution. If they scream out loud sometimes, then it is in the hope that someone will at least notice that they are there.

William James wrote, “No more fiendish punishment could be devised, if such a thing were physically possible, than that one should be turned loose in society and remain absolutely unnoticed by all the members thereof. If no one turned around when we entered, answered when we spoke, or minded what we did, but if every person we met ‘cut us dead’ and acted as if we were nonexistent things, a kind of rage and impotent despair would before long well up in us, from which the cruelest bodily torture would be a relief.” This is precisely the pain that so many in the church feel, women, gays, ethnic minorities. We as a church need to find ways of saying, “I see you. I do not just see you as an object, an obedient churchgoer, someone who puts some money in the collection, but I see you as a subject, who sees me.”

It was precisely this sense of being invisible that tormented so many more traditional Catholics in the ’70s and ’80s, feeling that their sensitivities were simply ignored, or that progressive Catholics took pleasure in shocking them. And so, now that the tide has turned, it is no surprise that they sometimes like to make themselves heard, after so many years of feeling unseen and unregarded. Pope Benedict wrote in *Deus Est Caritas* “Seeing with the eyes of Christ, I can give to others much more than their outward necessities; I can give them the look of love, which they crave.”

Recognizing the other person is more than just seeing that they exist and that they hold various opinions. It is recognizing them as fellow seekers, people who also are searching

for God, in their own way. They too are on a journey, even if they seem to be walking in the opposite direction. I grew up in a strong Catholic family, with endless Catholic cousins and uncles and aunts. We had gone to the same Benedictine school for four generations. I grew up proud that I had the blood of martyrs in my veins. For people like me, the great adventure of the '70s was reaching out to discover a larger world, filled with Protestants, with Jews and even atheists, whom I could share so much with. We eagerly cast off our habits, and so as to express our individualism, put on identical black polo neck jerseys and blue jeans. We went to the pubs and on demonstrations. We were, you might say, Romans stretching ourselves to be more Catholic, universal.

What it means to be Roman

Many young people today have grown up without a strong sense of identity. Often the ones I meet are converts, or maybe from non-practicing backgrounds. And so the exciting journey for them is to discover what it means to be Roman. They will delight in what is distinctive, and put pictures of the pope on their doors. They too are fellow searchers. We have to hear what they say and see what they do as part of another journey, leading to the Kingdom too.

Let me finally look very briefly at two areas of tension, and see what a dialogue -- I mean "a conversation" -- might look like. My argument is that when there is a disagreement, then go deeper. Rather than just slogging it out at the level where you simply disagree, go to a depth at which you may be able to transcend your difference. You may still end up by disagreeing, but at least you may see the difference in a new light. I will take liturgy and sexual ethics, two hot spots.

First of all liturgy. This is always a minefield. I am sure that you all know the old joke about liturgists? How can you tell the difference between a liturgist and a terrorist? You can negotiate with the terrorist. There is something about organizing liturgy that makes reasonable people go red and storm out of the room. I hope that even raising the subject will not empty this lecture hall.

The fundamental difference here is often between those who see the liturgy as something that is given, and those who believe that we are called upon to be creative in liturgy. This is the difference between those priests who begin the Eucharist by saying, "The Lord be with you," and those who say, "Good morning. It's wonderful to see you all here today." There are those who believe that the rubrics must be followed carefully and without deviation. And there are those who believe that the liturgy is boring and mechanical unless it can be personalized. This is a bit of a caricature, but I am sure that you get the picture.

This tension between two ways of celebrating the liturgy is the cause of vast pain in the church. It rests on the opposition between the liturgy as given, received from our ancestors, not to be tinkered with, and the liturgy as a creative celebration, which is prepared for these people, at this time, a unique moment. The answer is, I suggest, to go

deeper and find ways of transcending this dichotomy between what is given and what we creatively make.

The present pope has a profound sense of the liturgy as a gift. He hates people just tinkering with it. He wrote that “when liturgy is self-made ... it can no longer give us what its proper gift should be: the encounter with the mystery that is not our own product but rather our origin and the source of our life.” Writing of his childhood and his growing love of the Eucharist he wrote, “It was becoming more and more clear to me that here [in the liturgy] I was encountering a reality that no one had simply thought up, a reality that no official authority or great individual had created. This mysterious fabric of texts and actions had grown from the faith of the church over centuries. It bore the whole weight of history within itself, and yet, at the same time, it was much more than the product of human history.” So one cannot just tinker with it as one likes.

Hard to know what to say

I myself discovered a deeper sense of what it is to receive the Eucharist as a gift during hard times in Africa. For example, Burundi was torn apart by civil war between Hutus and Tutsis. For a few days I toured with two of my brother Dominicans, one Hutu and the other Tutsi. We were looking for members of the order and their families in refugee camps around the country. The whole place was in chaos. We hardly saw anyone except groups of soldiers and rebels, seeking each other to fight. Both sides suffered appalling losses. But every evening the three of us celebrated the Eucharist together. Often it was hard to know what to say to each other, but the church gave us something to do, what Jesus himself did the night before he died. It was a liberation that we did not have to make anything up. The church gave us a ritual with which to face the moment, and it was powerful because it was given and not invented.

But I would suggest that there is no ultimate conflict between seeing liturgy as that which is given by the church and creativity. There is all the difference between liturgical tinkering, especially when the priest wants to make himself the star of the show, and real creativity, which is a way of reverently accepting what is given. Receiving a gift is not just a passive act.

It is interesting that the English word “invent” has changed its meaning. Originally it meant to find something. We used to celebrate the Feast of the Invention of the Cross by St. Helena. Some people thought that she did just that, that she made it up! But here *invention* means to *discover*. Later the word evolved to its present meaning, of that which one creates oneself. If I invent a washing machine, it means that I have not found it in the shop. But Christian thinking pushes us beyond an opposition here. Creative writers -- poets, novelists -- show us what is the true meaning of human existence. Their inventivity shows us what is the case. Just as theologians creatively welcome the gift of the Word of God.

If one can move to this deeper level of analysis, then liturgists may still get upset with each other. Some will wish to stick to the rubrics and others will experiment. But the

argument may be more fruitful, because both may be brought to see that it is not the choice between receiving a gift and making it up. We should have moved on.

The other area I will just touch on is that of sexual ethics. The church faces something of a crisis in sexual ethics. We propose a beautiful ideal, of sexual intercourse within the context of a lifelong commitment to a person of the other sex, open to the reproduction of children. And yet this ideal is hardly understood, let alone practiced, by most people within our society. A large percentage of people are either divorced and remarried, or living with partners, or practicing contraception or in same-sex relationships. The percentages, at least in Britain, are not much different for Catholics. So there is a chasm between the church's teaching about sexual behavior and what Catholics live.

One reaction to this, often that of Communion Catholics, is to insist on the teaching. This has been the teaching of the church through the centuries, and it would be dishonest to surrender it or to compromise with a corrupt society. If our teaching is true, then we must stand by it, even if it offends people. Many Kingdom Catholics will feel unhappy about this. Millions of decent Catholics will find themselves pushed to the edge of the community because they are in what are called "irregular situations." This may be by chance, or weakness or a genuine disagreement with the church's teaching. It is for people like this that Christ came, and how can we act in any way that makes them feel less than fully welcome?

This is a real dilemma. Often what happens is that the church's official teaching is proclaimed, but we look the other way and let it be known that everyone is welcome. We call this "the pastoral solution," but it can look simply dishonest. Should we firmly proclaim the traditional sexual ethics and risk distancing people from Christ? Or should we be more accommodating, with the risk of just surrendering a moral vision?

What the Gospel says about sex

I am not sure, and this is not the moment to explore the issue in detail. But this is a good example where the way forward is again to go deeper. We must dig down until we get to the fundamental debate that underlies the superficial disagreement. In my book, to put in a last plug, I suggest that we must explore a Christian understanding of our sexuality. What does the Gospel say about sexuality's deepest meaning? And I propose that we can do this by looking at the Last Supper, where Christ gave us his body: "This is my body and I give it to you." We can only understand our sexuality in the light of this utter self-gift of Christ. So rather than battling away at the level of permissiveness versus insistence on the rules, we try to understand a Eucharistic understanding of what it means to live sexuality as the reverent gift and acceptance of our bodies.

This is very short hand. It would take a whole lecture to spell out what such a Eucharistic understanding of sexuality might mean. All that I am trying to do is to show when conversation gets stuck and dialogue seems impossible, then we dig down deeper, until we reach the bedrock of the Gospel, and then maybe we will understand each other better. We may not agree but we will be able to talk.

We cannot tolerate polarization any longer. It is wounding the life and the mission of the church. Healing division requires of us, first of all, that we understand the distress of Catholics who are not like us. We must get some sense of their root shock, their loss of a feeling of being at home in the church. We must open our minds and imagination to what they endure. And when conversation seems to be getting nowhere, then we need to go deeper, until we reach a level where our fundamental insights and intuitions may be reconcilable.

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