

Paul, Corinth and Ecumenism¹

It has been reported to me by Mgr. Jeremy's people that there are quarrels among you, my friends. What I mean is that each of you says, "I belong to the Pope," or "I belong to the LMS," or "I am a charismatic," or "I'm just a Christian." Has Christ been divided? Was the Pope crucified for you? Or were you baptized in the name of the Pope?²

Most of you will recognise this as a slight variation on a passage from the beginning of the first letter to the Corinthians.

Now I appeal to you, brothers and sisters, by the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, that all of you be in agreement and that there be no divisions among you, but that you be united in the same mind and the same purpose. For it has been reported to me by Chloe's people that there are quarrels among you, my brothers and sisters. What I mean is that each of you says, "I belong to Paul," or "I belong to Apollos," or "I belong to Cephas," or "I belong to Christ." Has Christ been divided? Was Paul crucified for you? Or were you baptized in the name of Paul? (1:10-13)

In fact although this text is often used to talk about ecumenism, strictly speaking the subject is divisions within a particular community, not divisions between established communities. Paul did have to deal also with this latter problem, as we see to some extent in the letter to the Galatians, and perhaps the biggest 'ecumenical' problem Paul faced was the tension between his (largely) Gentile communities and the Jewish communities of Jerusalem and Antioch. While the letters to the Corinthians do not address the substance of this debate, 2 Corinthians does seem to contain traces of it both in terms of the problem (depending on what you make of his sarcastic references to 'super apostles' - cf. 11:5) and in terms of one means of healing the rift – the Collection for the Poor in Jerusalem which we see in chapters 8-9. We will return to this theme later in the lecture. Nevertheless although the talk of divisions in the early chapters of 1 Corinthians is primarily about divisions within an established community, it still has wider ecumenical significance at a number of levels. So let us return to Mgr. Jeremy's - sorry Chloe's – people.

CORINTH

First of all we need to draw a quick sketch of Corinth to find out who 'Chloe's people' might have been. Corinth was a cosmopolitan city of Roman foundation. The Greek city

¹ Text of a public lecture given on 5 Feb 2009 as part of a series for the Year of St Paul.

² This is a purely rhetorical device on my part – I had not actually heard of any such divisions!

legendary for its temple prostitutes and proverbially immoral had been destroyed by the Romans in 146BC and the city Paul knew had been re-founded by Julius Caesar in 44BC and considered itself as much an outpost of Rome as a Greek city. Corinth was a key port on the narrow isthmus that joins the Peloponnese peninsula to the rest of Greece. As such it was a meeting place of many peoples and cultures.³

Society consisted principally of households, normally but not exclusively patriarchal in structure. These would have family, Normally in fact an extended family, and a variety of servants and slaves of various status. When we speak of slaves in the Greco Roman era we should be aware that, while there were certainly many slaves whose life was very hard, household slaves often had quite high status and were very much trusted aides of their masters.

Church meetings would have taken place in such households, and so the head of the household would have had a leadership place in the church. Chloe's people probably refers to the servants and slaves from Chloe's household, some of whom were presumably either visiting Paul or had got word to him. Whether Chloe herself was a Christian is not explicitly mentioned, though it seems likely. The fact that Paul can say to the Corinthians that "Not many of you were powerful (1:26)" suggests that at least a few were, and would therefore have been heads of households.

We know of at least two such communities in Corinth, one that met in the house of Prisca and Aquilla (1 Cor 16:19) and one in the house of Gaius (Rom 16:23).⁴ If Chloe's household was another such community that makes three. While there is no evidence that divisions were rooted in household communities, it cannot have helped cohesion that the community was physically divided.

THERE ARE QUARRELS AMONG YOU...

So what are these quarrels about exactly? They were probably not strictly doctrinal, since Paul usually deals with doctrinal problems at length, and Paul never really says what they are divided over. However we can get some idea from the slogans he quotes.

³ Cf. J. Murphy O'Connor "Corinth" in *ABD* Vol 1 pp 1134-9

⁴ Cf. J. D. G. Dunn *1 Corinthians* London: T&T Clark, 1999, p. 17. This little study guide is an excellent general resource for understanding 1 Corinthians in its social setting

I belong to Paul

It is interesting to note that Paul starts by effectively criticising the party that uses his own name in their slogan. This singling out of a group is emphasised when he uses the same group when poking fun at them later in the passage (was Paul crucified for you...) The irony for Paul is that though the claim to belong to him they have not, at least in his eyes, understood what he is about.

I belong to Apollos

This group seems to be the more troublesome, if chapter 3 is anything to go by – but who was Apollos? Acts says this of him:

Now there came to Ephesus a Jew named Apollos, a native of Alexandria. He was an eloquent man, well-versed in the scriptures. He had been instructed in the Way of the Lord; and he spoke with burning enthusiasm and taught accurately the things concerning Jesus, though he knew only the baptism of John. He began to speak boldly in the synagogue; but when Priscilla and Aquila heard him, they took him aside and explained the Way of God to him more accurately. (18:24-26)

The references to Alexandria and his eloquence have led many to conclude that Apollos was familiar with the sophisticated allegorising exegetical techniques used by the Jewish scholars of Alexandria (of whom Philo, a contemporary of Paul, is the most well known). As such he perhaps provided richer fare for the similarly sophisticated people of Corinth than Paul's perhaps more straightforward presentation of the Gospel. This appears to be confirmed by Paul's references to Apollos in the subsequent chapter:

And so, brothers and sisters, I could not speak to you as spiritual people, but rather as people of the flesh, as infants in Christ. I fed you with milk, not solid food, for you were not ready for solid food. Even now you are still not ready, for you are still of the flesh. For as long as there is jealousy and quarreling among you, are you not of the flesh, and behaving according to human inclinations? For when one says, "I belong to Paul," and another, "I belong to Apollos," are you not merely human? What then is Apollos? What is Paul? Servants through whom you came to believe, as the Lord assigned to each. I planted, Apollos watered, but God gave the growth. So neither the one who plants nor the one who waters is anything, but only God who gives the growth. The one who plants and the one who waters have a common purpose, and each will receive wages according to the labor of each. For we are God's servants, working together; you are God's field, God's building. According to the grace of God given to me, like a skilled master builder I laid a foundation, and someone else is building on it. Each builder must choose with care how to build on it. For no one can lay any foundation other than the one that has been laid; that foundation is Jesus Christ.

Note that Paul does not in any way criticise Apollos. What he is critical of is the using of Apollos' teaching as a 'banner' for a rallying call within the church community. It is not hard to see similar phenomena within our own church communities.

I belong to Cephas

Cephas is Aramaic for Rock, which in Greek is *Petros* – Peter. Curiously only Paul uses the Aramaic version of the Simon’s nickname in the NT, the Gospels all translate it. It is not clear the Peter was ever in Corinth, and the reference may be to some aspect of a pro-Jerusalem faction within the community. There may be some link between the table fellowship issues of Galatians and the dietary questions around meat in 1 Corinthians. However Paul does not pay much direct attention to this group – Cephas is only mentioned again in the concluding passage of the section:

So let no one boast about human leaders. For all things are yours, whether Paul or Apollos or Cephas or the world or life or death or the present or the future—all belong to you, and you belong to Christ, and Christ belongs to God (3:21-23)

I belong to Christ

While there may have been a party who countered the other slogans by saying simply that they belonged to Christ, it seems more likely that this is Pauls ‘counter-slogan’ (otherwise the *reduction ad absurdum* Paul uses in the later verses would not work.) So we could perhaps re-translate slightly

What I mean is that each of you says, “I belong to Paul,” or “I belong to Apollos,” or “I belong to Cephas,” Well I belong to Christ! Has Christ been divided?

This would seem to be corroborated by the passage at the end of chapter 3 which we have just seen, where belonging to Christ is set against association with human leaders.

MEMBERS OF ONE BODY UNITED IN LOVE

A number of scholars see the opening sentence of our initial passage

Now I appeal to you, brothers and sisters, by the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, that all of you be in agreement and that there be no divisions among you, but that you be united in the same mind and the same purpose. (1:10)

As what is referred to in rhetorical terms as the *propositio* or central argument of the letter. If that is true (and the fact that most of the letter is about divisions within the community over one thing or another suggests that there is some merit in the argument) then the major section towards the end of the letter is perhaps a key to understanding Paul’s response to the divisions. At the heart of this is perhaps one of the best loved passages in the writings of St Paul:

If I speak in the tongues of mortals and of angels, but do not have love, I am a noisy gong or a clanging cymbal. And if I have prophetic powers, and understand all mysteries and all knowledge, and if I have all faith, so as to remove mountains, but do not have love, I am nothing. If I give away all my possessions, and if I hand over my body so that I may boast, but do not have love, I gain nothing. Love is patient; love is kind; love is not envious or boastful or arrogant or rude. It does not insist on

its own way; it is not irritable or resentful; it does not rejoice in wrongdoing, but rejoices in the truth. It bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things. Love never ends.. (13:1-8a)

Now while this passage is very popular at weddings, Paul is applying this to the whole community. It is in fact the centrepiece of a much longer section – chapters 12-14 – which deal with the distribution and exercise of spiritual gifts in the community.

In more recent ecumenical discussion the idea of ‘exchange of gifts’ has become a significant theme, and this has developed into what has been termed ‘receptive ecumenism’. We will come onto this shortly. However we need to look at some other aspects of this text first.

When Paul talks of gifts in first Corinthians he asserts several key points.

- The gifts come from a common source – the triune God.
- Different gifts are given to different people.
- All the gifts are important, even if some are more ‘ordinary’ than others.
- The gifts are primarily for the building up of the community. They are not for the exaltation of individuals. As such they need to be exercised in an orderly fashion.
- The hierarchy of the gifts reflects this – epitomised in the famous phrase “the greatest of these is love”

The idea of ecumenism as an ‘exchange of gifts’ means that a given communion sees its differences from other communions – especially those things which it has and regards important and which it perceives others lack – are things to be offered as gifts to the other rather than as things used to accentuate and express division. While this is clearly a positive step it contains a few risks. Among these is a potential to become patronising, because it looks primarily for the lacunae in other communions. Secondly, what one communion perceives as a gift may not be welcomed by another. This has been expressed in what might be called ‘dead mouse ecumenism’ – the parallel being drawn with the reaction of a pet owner when her cat comes in proudly carrying a dead mouse and offers it to her.

Receptive ecumenism, at its most basic, is simply seeing this from the other side – encouraging communions to look at one another and to see what they can receive. This already happens – you will see candles in Protestant churches and Bible study groups in Catholic churches in part because they have experience these things through ecumenical

contacts and have discerned them to be valuable. The fact that many of you may regard this as unremarkable is itself testimony to the success of this approach, even though the label ‘receptive ecumenism’ is relatively new.

However Receptive Ecumenism is a little more than this. Paul Murray, summarising Thomas Reese, puts it this way:

it is now... appropriate to view the capacity for receptive ecumenical learning *across* traditions as the necessary key for unlocking the potential for transformation *within* traditions.⁵

To put it another way, we can only become better Catholics by engaging with our brother and sisters from other communions. And vice versa. Ecumenism is at the heart of what it is to be Church.

This is pretty much Paul’s point. Earlier he applies it to the Eucharist, and he is damningly critical of “all who eat and drink without discerning the body”, saying that they “eat and drink judgment against themselves”. The ‘body’ here is almost certainly a reference to the Church, as that is how he uses the term ‘body’ both in 6:15 and in the subsequent chapter, and also because that makes sense in the context of the divided way in which they are celebrate Eucharist.

As a bit of an aside here it should be noted that divisions in Corinth on this point are socio-economic rather than theological. It would appear that in the house based churches Eucharist was being celebrated in the context of a meal in which only the ‘important’ people actually got to sit down for the full meal. The rest (servants? the poor who are also Christians?) were left out of the meal as such, perhaps because they came in later after completing their household tasks, even if they participated in some way in the Eucharistic element. If we were to apply this to ourselves the reflection we should probably be making concerns us participating in the Eucharist and yet not reaching out to our brothers and sisters who also share the same Eucharist in countries where there is poverty and hunger. One could argue that ecumenism is about more than just theological and ecclesiological unity.

⁵ Paul D, Murray “Receptive Ecumenism and Catholic Learning – Establishing the Agenda” in Paul D. Murray (ed.) *Receptive Ecumenism and the Call to Catholic Learning* (OUP: Oxford, 2008) p. 7

However that is perhaps a discussion for another paper and I want to return to ecumenism as it is more conventionally envisaged.

Murray describes Receptive Ecumenism thus

Receptive Ecumenism is concerned to place at the forefront of the Christian ecumenical agenda the self-critical question ‘What, in any give situation, can one’s own tradition appropriately learn with integrity from other traditions?’ and, moreover, to ask this question without insisting, although certainly hoping, that these other traditions are also asking themselves the same question.⁶

This is not a replacement for the careful dialogues of theologians to attempt to achieve consensus on theological points, but the process of that kind of dialogue is descriptive and illuminative but not in itself transformative, for it seeks to identify where we are rather than where we are going. With Receptive Ecumenism, on the other hand

the conviction is that if all were asking and pursuing this question, then all would be moving, albeit somewhat unpredictably, but moving nevertheless, to places where more may, in turn, becomes possible than appears to be the case at the present.⁷

Returning to Paul, it is clear in 1 Corinthians 14 among other places that the dividedness and disorder of the community is hampering the evangelical mission of the Church, because the gifts are not being used in a way that builds the church up (literally ‘edify’), and that the Corinthians need to take a step back from their egos, recognise that gifts come from God, and are to be exercised in accordance with God’s will. Receptive Ecumenism is, as it were, an ecclesial response to this imperative. Less cacophony, more harmony.

THE COLLECTION FOR JERUSALEM

As I have already said, first Corinthians is addressed to a problem within a communion – specifically within the church community of Corinth, which Paul clearly feels he can write to as one entity even if it may have met as several groups at several houses. Second Corinthians, however, reflects some rather different questions.

Second Corinthians can be divided into two parts (which may originally have been separate letters). In chapters 10-13 Paul is concerned with some teachers who have come

⁶ *Ibid.* p. 12

⁷ *Ibid.*

into the community and who are clearly critical of Paul and are encouraging some of the egocentric attitudes Paul criticises in 1 Corinthians. This leads to Paul's famous 'boasting' about his disasters and his 'thorn in the flesh'. Although the situation is different this does not add much new to our reflections on the ecumenical significance of Paul's dealings with Corinth.

The first part of second Corinthians, however, introduces us to what is usually referred to as the 'collection'. This appears in chapters 8 and 9, and is a theme that runs through a number of Paul's letters. In these chapters Paul is encouraging a friendly rivalry between Macedonia (Philippi & Thessalonica) and Achaia (Corinth) over who will be more generous in a collection of Funds for the 'saints'. This is almost certainly the 'remembering of the poor' we find in Galatians:

when James and Cephas and John, who were acknowledged pillars, recognized the grace that had been given to me, they gave to Barnabas and me the right hand of fellowship, agreeing that we should go to the Gentiles and they to the circumcised. They asked only one thing, that we remember the poor, which was actually what I was eager to do. (2:9-10)

The Church in Jerusalem was suffering from persecution and possibly also famine, and Paul sees the collection as almost a *quid pro quo* in that

if the Gentiles have come to share in their spiritual blessings, they ought also to be of service to them in material things. (Rom 15 27)

However there is more than just charity going on here, for, as the above texts suggests, the collection is an expression of the unity between the Jewish and Gentile sections of the Church. That such a division existed – at least at a missionary level – is clear from Galatians. Galatians also makes it clear that the relationship between the two 'branches' (if you like) of Christianity had become strained. Interesting Paul never tells us in Galatians the extent to which his dispute with Cephas over table fellowship was resolved, which would at least suggest that it was not resolved in Paul's favour!

The importance of the acceptance of the collection is made clear in Romans – Paul asks the Romans to intercede for him that his 'ministry' (the collection) will be acceptable to the 'saints' in Jerusalem. Why should Paul be worried that a –presumably fairly large – donation to the Jerusalem church might be rejected? It can only be because the acceptance of the collection would imply acceptance of Paul's mission and a recognition

of the communities Paul had founded as part of the Church. Thus the issue is more conventionally ecumenical than the issues in first Corinthians.

But what can we glean from this for our own ecumenical reflection? Once again we have the concept of ‘exchange of gifts’. There are a couple points here worthy of note. Firstly, there is an apparent reluctance among at least some Corinthians to share their gifts – here their financial wealth – but it is interesting how this might parallel their egocentricity elsewhere criticised. Secondly, Paul suspects that the community in Jerusalem will be unwilling to receive this gift. The only conceivable reason for a poor and struggling community to reject a large dollop of cash must be that they felt it might seriously compromise their integrity. At one level this is a noble sentiment, perhaps akin to churches insisting on using ethical investments. But at another level – and this would perhaps be the case here – it smacks of a misguided sense of self sufficiency.

Returning to our theme of receptive ecumenism it should be noted that if gifts are given to members of the Church then they are given, as Paul says, for the benefit of the whole Church, therefore from a catholic perspective it is not only permissible but imperative that we seek to receive those gifts which are given to those individuals and communities with whom our communion is sadly impaired. Some fear that by embracing the gifts given outside the visible confines of their own communion they will somehow be watering down their own tradition. Certainly that is heard from time to time in Catholic circles, and some have even gone so far as accusing the second Vatican Council of being a ‘protestantisation’ of the Church. If that means that the Council learnt from the God-given insights of some of our separated brothers, discerning with the Holy Spirit how they might enrich the Church, then I for one say ‘three cheers’. In terms of the ‘collection’ the willingness to receive gifts means money arrives to the needy saints of Jerusalem, rather than festering in some port, perhaps to be appropriated by the governor Felix.

Of course all this also highlights another dimension of ecumenism already hinted at – the recognition of our unity with Christians who are much poorer than ourselves. In these days of credit crunch and moderate recession, it would be terrible if we were to ‘close in’ on ourselves and forget our connectedness with the wider Christian – and indeed human

– community. But how are we to perceive this as ‘receptive’? Returning to Paul’s rationale behind the collection:

if the Gentiles have come to share in their spiritual blessings, they ought also to be of service to them in material things. (Rom 15 27)

We need to see what these communities can offer us.

When Fr. Kevin Dring was in Peru he sent regular letters back to many of us, full of photos of happy, smiling faces, and the letters seem to indicate to me that the people there generally seemed to have a real zest for life despite their difficulties and poverty. Another example is the laughter I encountered in Dominican Missionary Sisters stationed at their Generalate in Crawley, and the joy of those who, having come to the end of their term in England, were returning home to Zimbabwe. Now I am sure they have their struggles and dark moments, but nevertheless we can learn so much about trust in God in adversity and enjoying life without needing to spend money from them, and thus we will be less defensive of our own personal and national financial wellbeing and more willing to share with those in real need. Thus the gifts God has given to his people will be used for all his people, not just a few, and the world may become a better place.

Now there are varieties of gifts, but the same Spirit; and there are varieties of services, but the same Lord; and there are varieties of activities, but it is the same God who activates all of them in everyone. To each is given the manifestation of the Spirit for the common good. (1 Cor 12:4-7)