

One holy catholic and apostolic Church 1 Corinthians 1:10-18
26 January 2014

Two weeks ago, a special ecumenical service was held at Sudbury United Methodist Church, in Massachusetts in the USA, to commemorate the 50th anniversary of a previous ecumenical service, when Cardinal Richard Cushing had been invited to address a combined congregation of Roman Catholics and Protestants. Fifty years later, Boston's Cardinal Sean O'Malley was invited to follow in his footsteps. But there was only one date that would work for him: Sunday 12 January, which this year was the Feast of the Baptism of the Lord. And after some consultation, it was agreed that if a service celebrating Christian unity was going to be held on the same day the Church celebrated the baptism of Jesus, then it would be appropriate to celebrate the Reaffirmation of the Baptismal Covenant. So, after Cardinal O'Malley had given his homily, United Methodist Bishop Sudarshana Devadhar joined him in leading a liturgy that called for the people to come forward, and receive the sign of the cross on their foreheads, with blessed water from the baptismal font.

The large number in attendance meant that an overflow room with a screen had to be set up, to accommodate those who could not fit into the main body of the church. Reverend Anne Robertson, a Methodist, and Tom, a Roman Catholic priest, whose last name I don't know, were assigned to take water from the font into the overflow room to sign the people in there, while the Cardinal and the Bishop would sign those in the Church. After they had collected their bowls, Tom asked Cardinal O'Malley for his blessing, and the Cardinal signed him with the blessed water, then did the same for Anne.

Then the unthinkable happened. Cardinal O'Malley asked Anne to sign him. And so an Irish Catholic Cardinal, a high ranking member of a denomination that does not ordain women, was signed with blessed water by a divorced Scottish Methodist clergywoman.

As Anne would later write in her blog, "In that moment of anointing -- as he anointed me and I anointed him -- we were not Protestant or Catholic, Scotch [sic] or Irish, male or female, cardinal or clergywoman. We were Christians, babes in Christ, spiritually naked before the Lord who called us both to service. Nothing could have better signified what everyone in that room had just reaffirmed. In baptism, we are one." ¹

When I was a young child back in the early 1970s, there were two world events I saw on our black and white television screen that I will never forget. The first was the war in Vietnam. The second was The Troubles in Belfast. And all I really knew about The Troubles was there was fighting between Roman Catholics and Protestants. I didn't know much about Roman Catholics, but I hadn't heard much positive said about them. My grandparents were fiercely sectarian, and I remember my grandmother's framed Loyal Orange Lodge certificate being proudly displayed on their living room wall. Now I am not trying to be disrespectful of my grandparents. This was a time when people could be devoutly divided on the basis of what church they went to. If we weren't fighting each other in the streets of Belfast, at the very least we were Catholic Frogs and Proddy Dogs. And I didn't know any Roman Catholics until I was about eight, when a Roman Catholic girl joined my class, and we became good friends.

It would be easy to think that differences between groups of Christians can be traced back to specific historical events, like the East-West Schism of 1054, and the Reformation. But as today's Epistle reading from Paul's First Letter to the Corinthians tells us, there have been disputes since the earliest days of the Church. Paul, who has never given me the impression of being the most patient person in the history of the Church, despaired, and he strongly reprimanded them for their quarrelling.

But the quarrelling has gone on for two thousand years now, and the Church today comprises various denominations that more or less fit into three main groups: Eastern Orthodox, Roman Catholic, and Protestant. While the different denominations of the Church have their differences and distinct characters, our core belief is essentially the same, namely that is through the death and resurrection of Jesus the Christ that we are reconciled with God.

When we say the Nicene Creed, we say the words, 'We believe in one holy catholic and apostolic Church'. I may well talk about 'holy' and 'apostolic' at some other date. But the word 'catholic', as used in its original context, as it is used here, does not mean 'Roman Catholic'. It means 'universal'. As Christchurch Anglican Priest Reverend Bosco Peters puts it, "If you have a catholic taste in food, you like all different foods: Indian, barbeque, hamburgers, roast, Chinese, pizza. If you have a catholic taste in music, you like all different types of music: reggae, classical, rap, pop." ² And in the context of the Church, "Catholic meant supporting diversity, rejoicing in variety." ³

Therefore, the 'one holy catholic and apostolic Church' actually means the whole Church, of which we are but one denomination. So it is quite

fitting that we acknowledge our brothers and sisters in other denominations when we say, “By one Spirit we were baptised into one body”, when we say The Peace. Because we are the Body of Christ. And as many of you will know, I identify as a ‘Catholic Anglican’, but to me this is just as much of a personal emphasis on being part of the ‘one holy catholic and apostolic Church’, as it is on my sitting closer to the Roman Catholic end of the Anglican spectrum.

But still, we continue to quarrel amongst ourselves. It may not be the 1970s anymore, but sectarian tension still exists in Northern Ireland. And a few weeks ago, I found myself debating against someone who was genuinely convinced that our Roman Catholic brothers and sisters were Satanic. Which is most unfortunate, because people who are not Christians see Christians treating each other in this way, and how the foolishness of an extremist few reflects badly on us all.

And these quarrels can occur within denominations, as well as between them. We only have to look at how our own Anglican Communion is grappling with the mysteries of human sexuality in a rapidly changing world, and how easy it could be for a schism to occur within our own denomination.

But let us go back to Massachusetts. Reverend Anne Robertson’s signing of Cardinal O’Malley prompted mixed reactions. Some were horrified, and said it was wrong for a woman to assume such a role. Even though Anne was not actually administering any Sacraments. But others understood that this was a powerful affirmation that there is no longer Jew or Greek, there is no longer slave or free, there is no longer male and female; for all of us are one in Christ. ⁴

We may worship God differently in different denominations, and we may have our unresolved differences, even within our own Anglican Communion. But by one Spirit we were baptised into one body. One holy catholic and apostolic Church.

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www.theword.tk

¹ <http://www.annerobertson.org/on-rites-and-symbols>

² <http://liturgy.co.nz/i-believe-in-catholic-church/17787>

³ Ibid.

⁴ Galatians 3:28 (NRSV)