

UNITY: THE DESIRE AND THE BARRIERS

Last week I wrote about Professor Henry Chadwick, a giant in ecumenical dialogue between Anglicans and Roman Catholics, who died after a lifetime of theological and ecumenical commitment. Anglican Archbishop of Canterbury Rowan Williams commented that dialogue now is in a “wintry” state, and that is a sad state of affairs.

Sr. Sara Butler, who has served on the Anglican-Roman Catholic International Commission (ARCIC) for dialogue, affirmed what we all in fact knew: a number of choices (often made unilaterally) have erected new barriers to the goal of full communion between us. How can these be overcome, so we can satisfy the will of Jesus Christ for the Church, that all might be one?

I have often, in describing the 16th century disputes that led to the Protestant Reformation, used the image of a dysfunctional family. Speaking simplistically, one could summarize the Protestant point of view as the defiant adolescent (“No one is going to tell me what to do!”), while the Catholic side was the arrogant parent (“Because I said so—so sit down and shut up!”). On this view, there should theoretically be quite of a bit of common ground on which to stand, to clear up the garbage that represents pique and ego rather than substantive religious disagreement. I have often thought that 85% (at least) of what we call differences can actually be traced to misunderstanding (accidental or willful) or pride. But what do we do about the remaining 15% of the disagreements that are substantial?

This, it seems, is where we are today: we have fundamental divergences on issues like abortion, divorce & re-marriage, ordination of women, same-sex marriage, and so on. Some of these might have some dimension of pride involved, but the bottom line truly is that the differing ecclesial bodies see the relationship between Truth and these issues differently, and they are inclined simply to walk away from dialogue rather than engage in it. This is all the more the case when the issues are regarded by one or both sides as *sine qua non*, that is, non-negotiables. We are then faced with fundamental disagreement, not just the need to apologize for bad manners or to clarify poor language.

All the more is there reason and need to pray for unity and to continue to dialogue: doors must remain open, even if both sides seem quite willing to let them slam shut of their own accord. Continuing dialogue might not produce positive results, but ending the conversation will certainly produce no results. We are engaging in this process (to which the Catholic Church is “irrevocably committed”) not because of our hope of converting others or because of willingness to compromise the truth, but because the Holy Spirit is greater than all divisions, and we will never allow ourselves to cease saying YES to being God’s tools: “We shall overcome, some day/O, deep in my heart, I do believe...”