

Rev. Dr John Berry's Sermon at the Ecumenical Service  
at St. Andrew's Scots Church, Valletta  
23<sup>rd</sup> January 2014

Dear friends in Christ,

It is an intensely moving experience to be with you this evening. We are gathered in the Lord's name to celebrate our Christian fellowship as well as to renew our commitment to the Lord's call to unity.

The reading from St Mark's Gospel, that we have heard, is a timely reminder of the urgency and obligation of the work of Christian unity.

### **1. On the Way to Capernaum**

The journey to Capernaum can be described as a life changing experience. Jesus teaches his disciples an important lesson: to seek unity, rather than disharmony. Disunity is not simply a scandal for the world, but indeed a grave obstacle to belief in God.

It is "on the way" to Capernaum that the disciples learn how to overcome division.

This journey implies a change in attitude, a conversion in the way one looks towards the other, an adaptation of the style one lives out one's faith. Jesus teaches that becoming followers of his, means taking into account one's brother and sister "on the way".

Indeed, ecumenism is not simply willingness to recognise and respect others, but most of all to link all human efforts to faith and love.

In the peripatetic school of Jesus, disciples are urged to instil a spirit of collaboration, instead of unrewarding competition. Discipleship is not about becoming the greatest or about who is right.

On the contrary; and the cue in this text is in the single question that Jesus makes to his disciples: "What were you arguing about on the way"? It is a pressing reminder to evaluate our perceptions, our discourse and ourselves "on the way" to Christian unity.

### **2. In the House**

Jesus poses that question for one simple reason: a divided house cannot stand. It has no "inner logic". It does not make any sense to speak of belonging to different entities; just as St Paul reminds the Christian community at Corinth. For just as a divided house cannot stand, so our division weakens and even threatens our witness.

Ecumenism asks for good will and readiness on our part to walk together, to speak to each other, to respect one other, and most important of all, to be “one in Christ”.<sup>1</sup>

There is a special detail that St Mark includes in this text. Jesus draws his disciples’ attention and instructs them while they were “in the house”. In other words, discipleship – and our participation in the ecumenical movement – is not simply about journeying together or being on a mission. It consists rather in focusing on the reason to arrive at the destination: Capernaum, that is, the “village of comfort”.

So, wherein can this comfort be found? It can be found “in the house”, in being with Jesus. Ecumenism consists in being “under one roof” with the Lord through baptism. It is there that Jesus calls us to him one by one. Through Baptism, we are all in his sheepfold. “Sanctified in Christ Jesus”,<sup>2</sup> to use St Paul’s words, we are entrusted to his care .

### **3. Welcoming Jesus**

In taking a little child in his arms, Jesus intends to emphasise the importance of welcoming others and being at their service. Fellowship demands serving together, being missionary disciples through social justice and charity. And it is the Spirit of God that pours God’s love in us that opens us towards others.

In the path of unity, we are called to grasp the true meaning of hospitality and to recognise the gift in the other: “whoever welcomes one such child in my name welcomes me, and whoever welcomes me welcomes not me but the one who sent me”.<sup>3</sup>

Ecumenism is indeed about this openness that demands some renunciation and sacrifice even of the things that we hold dear. Let us keep in mind God’s word in the first reading: “Build up, build up, prepare the way, remove every obstruction from my people’s way”.<sup>4</sup>

Welcoming Jesus in each other is nothing less than being “last of all and servant of all”.<sup>5</sup> It is only through prayer that we can invert human logic and exchange gifts in service and for the spiritual growth of our different Churches and Traditions.

### **4. We Tried to Stop Him**

When the disciples tried to stop someone who was casting out demons – because he was not on their side – Jesus affirmed that “whoever is not against us is for us”.<sup>6</sup>

Dear friends, the path of unity demands fidelity to the Word of Truth and to free ourselves from misconceptions and unnecessary fear.

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<sup>1</sup> Galatians 3,28.

<sup>2</sup> 1 Corinthians 1,2.

<sup>3</sup> Mark 9,37.

<sup>4</sup> Isaiah 57,14.

<sup>5</sup> Mark 9,35.

<sup>6</sup> Mark 9,40.

John's difficulty can easily be translated in one basic question that ought to be asked: "what do we most fear giving up for unity"? Where will ecumenism lead us?

The whole issue revolves around what keeps us distinctive from , as well as what unites us to, each other as Christians. Ecumenism might frighten us by what it may demand of us. Nonetheless, the path to unity requires letting go, sacrifice and courage. From all of us.

Having said that, let us be clear: Unity is not uniformity. Ecumenism does not mean that we are required to become identical to each other. On the contrary, we have much to cherish, appreciate and learn from in our respective traditions. Furthermore, ecumenism is not compromise and it does not seek the lowest common denominator. Ecumenism demands of us that we do not confuse what is revered with what is essential.

## **5. Bearing the Name of Christ**

Ecumenism consists in giving that cup of water to use Jesus' words, while bearing His name. However, it is not our own undertaking or labour. It is rather an "enterprise of faith".<sup>7</sup> Ecumenism supposes that God comes to awaken consciences and leads them where he wills.

It is through the power of the cross that divisions are overcome. Christian unity is a task too great for us humans to accomplish. It is Christ Jesus who heals all ruptures. Unity will not be the confessional victory of a Church which would be content to assimilate others without changing anything in herself ... It will be a victory for Jesus Christ; a victory of the plenitude of the Gospel over Churches which have recognised this plenitude by deepening their own faith.

It is the Holy Spirit who enhances an intimate communion with God and with others. The Spirit draws us closer us to God and to each other. In this light, it is only if we progress decidedly towards common expressions of proclamation, service and witness that we are granted the reward of which Jesus speaks in the Gospel.

The Spirit empowers us to bear witness to and be co-responsible for the communion that we cherish and celebrate. Our commitment implies perseverance in planting seeds of unity and fostering the faith in our Christian communities. Let us place ourselves in God's plan to harmonise our wills with God's will in the same way that Yves Congar writes: "My prayer for unity is to place myself in God's hands, to offer myself to be the man he wants, to do what he wants".<sup>8</sup>

Let us never forget, therefore that we are pilgrims journeying alongside one another. Furthermore, truly Christians are those who dwell in faith and charity.

May God the Father bless us with the radiant peace of His face.

May Christ the Son manifest «the unity that God wills, in the way that he wills».

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<sup>7</sup> See YVES CONGAR, *Ecumenism and the Future of the Church*, 117.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*, 119.

May the Spirit enlighten us to respond heartily to the prayer of the Lord Jesus that “they may all be one”.<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>9</sup> Jn 17,21.