

ENDING ECCLESIAL ENMITY

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A recent gathering of adult faith formators in Brisbane brought together leaders in the field from across Australia and New Zealand. The focus of the conference was the development of Christian identity and so the Second Vatican Council was a natural reference point for discussion and reflection.

It came to mind that the continuing divisions and uneven reception of the Council could be read as expressive of the fact that many of us are asking very different sorts of questions about the contemporary Church, related to the quality of its life, its organisation, direction, and so on. These different starting points can influence our ability to hear one another and interpret each other correctly.

For instance, issues of authority, in particular the quality of its exercise, loom large in the hierarchy of importance for some. For others, the front line questions pertain to the Church's engagement with the culture of modernity. This is evidenced among a number of fervent youth groups which define themselves, consciously and unapologetically, as 'counter cultural'. Here the politics of demarcation appear to take centre stage.

For others, the commitment to social justice remains upmost in importance though, sadly, this concern appears somewhat marginalised in the current tide of conversation. Questions of resource, legislative compliance and policy approach are pressing issues in the field.

Of course, much ink has been spilt over recent liturgical reforms and it has brought to the surface many of the underlying differences in ecclesiology and affective sensibility that exist among Catholic people.

Perhaps a conversation to anticipate is that concerning the possibility, and ambiguities, of 'the new evangelisation' which will surely become a byword for Catholic commitment following the forthcoming synod on the subject.

Of course, the catholic sensibility impels us to keep this variety of questions and concerns at play. This endeavour safeguards us from insularity or narrowness (a 'single issue Catholicism') and promotes a sense that the project of faith is comprehensive rather than one-dimensional or else reducible to personal taste.

Accepting the breadth of Catholic conversation as a positive challenge for each of us together, the *depth* of our questioning demands a similar generosity or openness without the presumption of agenda on any 'side'.

A standard example would be the concern for the diminishing numbers of clergy which, for a Eucharistic community, is a serious issue. However, one could ask more broadly, "What are our leadership needs?" and the scope for responses, I think, is

considerably enriched though, importantly, without bringing into question the significance of the ordained priesthood or the definitive, Eucharistic character of our Church as a communion.

Certainly, questions about the faith or ecclesial organisation can be interpreted as smacking of disobedience rather than looking for new knowledge and approaching God in the existing season. However, this is only so when ulterior motives are taken for granted.

If our conversation as Church is to be constructive and a bearer of genuine possibility then a basic level of trust and goodwill is called for among all interlocutors. This includes a willingness to attend to and engage with each others' questions as sincere, rather than anticipating them as a subterfuge for concealed ambition. This might seem a curious thing for which to advocate but I sense this quality of relation is an ongoing project for us all rather than being a full triumph.

Indeed, the cost of *not* extending such goodwill, or else riding roughshod over the other, in the most passionate debates over Vatican II, liturgical style, or the exercise of authority can be counted.

Over the last decade of my own faith, I have seen many choose to 'opt out' of the conversation altogether and, fatigued by the clash of ideologies, retreat into small groups of the like-minded or even move off from the Church in search of greener pastures. These movements diminish our life as a communion. Real and regrettable, such phenomena often express a profound disappointment in the overall atmosphere or spirit of ecclesial life and relationship rather than a reaction to any particular tenet of faith. In plain language, people get turned off when 'the things of God' get used as ammunition.

In a time when we often experience ourselves as a Church of 'five loaves and two fish,' conscious of so many hungry people but limited in resource, our ability to receive and even bear with one another, secure in Christ, is more important than ever. Without such charity, we risk conversation without a soul. In the pointed words of Herbert McCabe, we risk "using the language of God to tell a lie."