

In a very comprehensive article by Adrian Hastings, published in our ecumenical journal *One in Christ* almost fifty years ago, there was a table outlining the possible situations in which other Christians could receive communion at Catholic altars and Catholics could receive communion from other Christians. The situations considered were: those of extreme emergency, serious spiritual need, and whenever one desires. Unfortunately, the headings of the two columns had been transposed so what was being said of the one grouping was now being said of the other; Catholics, in other words, had been labelled as ‘other Christians’ and ‘other Christians’ as Catholics. This was amended in a later issue with a slip which could be stuck in the appropriate page but I thought of it as a wonderful *Freudian* slip expressing our real desire to be indistinguishable – for Catholics, that is, to be just like other Christians and for other Christians to be just like us. I’m not sure that things have greatly moved on since then with regard to doctrine but they have certainly moved on with regard to appearance – with the ease, that is, that many Christians now find in each other’s company, perhaps realising that the differences between us as denominations can just as well be found within each of the denominations, and the task and joy we then have of learning to cope with our own differences is the ground or seed-bed for discovering how to cope with the differences of others. And I wonder, also, if this doesn’t make St Paul’s conversion story all the more appropriate for the week of prayer for Christian Unity for there we have a man firmly set in one column of beliefs suddenly transposed into another and ideally situated to engage with both sets of belief: a zealous Jew who becomes a zealous Christian Jew and, importantly, not by his own doing or deliberation. And, more than that, his zealous nature can now be used by God for the completion of Israel’s purpose as a light to all the nations. What we can learn from this, perhaps, is that it’s not so much knowledge of the Law, of this dogma or doctrine that matters, but our desire for God and our willingness to be blinded by the sight of God, or rather, to do God’s will however it comes to us.

Or, in the words of the Cistercian Abbot, André Louf, considering the role of monasticism in bringing the Churches of the East and West together,

The path of spiritual ecumenism has the privilege of beginning with a communion that is, so to speak, antecedent, already distinctly felt but whose consequences must still be explored . . . this dialogue follows life closely and proceeds from it. It advances rather by successive shifts of terrain that are, I venture to say, unforeseeable and irresistible, and that result in a sudden modification of the theological and ecclesiological landscape, and therefore cause to appear new configurations of the territory that no-one had dared to predict. The shifts in the terrain on the surface of the ecclesial crust are provoked, no doubt, by a new subterranean equilibrium, that is to say, always by an increase in holiness and love.

André Louf: *Notes from a Pilgrimage*

It is love, above all else, that will make us indistinguishable from other Christians – an ecumenism of the heart which Paul is just beginning to realise and which Br. Herbert, celebrating his 99th birthday today, realised long ago. What we have been praying for over this past week is not simply a period of ‘unusual kindness’ but for a future when kindness becomes the norm.

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