

# The Heritage of the Reformation

## What Remains of the Reformation Today

John Morrill 19 October 2017

The Michaelhouse Centre, attached to Great St Mary's Church, is a movingly appropriate place to discuss this subject. John Fisher was Master of Michaelhouse when it was a college (this was from 1497 to 1505); the Dutch humanist Desiderius Erasmus (1466-1536) preached here; the great reformer Martin Bucer, an exile from Strasbourg and Professor in the University of Cambridge in the reign of Edward VI, is buried in Great St Mary's next door. It is germane to our theme that under Mary I his coffin was dug up and his remains and his books burned in the market square, also adjacent to Michaelhouse. Yet Bucer is also important because Bucer was an irenic figure: from the start of the Reformation he pleaded with Protestant groups to stop quarrelling about details. Both the need for tolerance (not the same as toleration) and the legacies of distrust are the themes of this address.

From the Roman Catholic perspective, of great importance is the Second Vatican Council decree on ecumenism, *Unitatis redintegratio*. Section 1 begins with the statement that

*The restoration of unity among all Christians is one of the principal concerns of the Second Vatican Council.*

Section 3 states that

*some and even very many of the significant elements and endowments which together go to build up and give life to the Church itself, can exist outside the visible boundaries of the Catholic Church: the written word of God; the life of grace; faith, hope and charity, with the other interior gifts of the Holy Spirit, and visible elements too. All of these, which come from Christ and lead back to Christ, belong by right to the one Church of Christ. The brethren divided from us also use many liturgical actions of the Christian religion. These most certainly can truly engender a life of grace in ways that vary according to the condition of each Church or Community. These liturgical actions must be regarded as capable of giving access to the community of salvation.*

Section 24, the final section, reads in part:

*It is the urgent wish of this Holy Council that the measures undertaken by the sons of the Catholic Church should develop in conjunction with those of our separated brethren so that no obstacle be put in the ways of divine Providence and no preconceived judgments impair the future inspirations of the Holy Spirit. The Council moreover professes its awareness that human powers and capacities cannot achieve this holy objective - the reconciling of all Christians in the unity of the one and only Church of Christ. It is because of this that the Council rests all its hope on the prayer of Christ for the Church, on our Father's love for us, and on the power of the Holy Spirit. 'And hope does not disappoint, because God's love has been poured into our hearts through the Holy Spirit, who has been given to us'.*

Catholics believe that they have a fullness of truth that other Christian communities lack. But other Christians often live out their part of the shared truth better than many Catholics do. I constantly learn authentic responses to the gospel from non-Catholics. True ecumenism consists not of finding a highest common factor in our understanding of Christ's message, but in celebrating all that we share and in celebrating it together and respecting and listening to one another about our differences while holding to our own conviction of what constitutes authority and tradition. Contrast this understanding with the mood at the time. The encyclical of Pope Leo X of 1520 *Exsurge Domine*, 'Condemning the Errors of Martin Luther', begins:

*Arise, O Lord, and judge your own cause. Remember your reproaches to those who are filled with foolishness all through the day. Listen to our prayers, for foxes have arisen seeking to destroy the vineyard whose winepress you alone have trod. When you were about to ascend to your Father, you committed the care, rule, and administration of the vineyard, an image of the triumphant church, to Peter, as the head and your vicar and his successors. The wild boar from the forest seeks to destroy it and every wild beast feeds upon it.*

After listing 41 errors of the reformers, the encyclical states that

*No one of sound mind is ignorant how destructive, pernicious, scandalous, and seductive to pious and simple minds these various errors are, how opposed they are to all charity and reverence for the holy Roman Church who is the mother of all the faithful and teacher of the faith; how destructive they are of the vigour of ecclesiastical discipline, namely obedience. This virtue is the font and origin of all virtues and without it anyone is readily convicted of being unfaithful.*

In that same conviction of the evil present in those outside one's own confession, and thinking of this country, we should remember the papal bull of Pope Pius V in 1570 in which he excommunicated Queen Elizabeth as a heretic, a bastard and as a tyrant who,

*having seized the crown and monstrosly usurped the place of supreme head of the Church in all we declare to be deprived of her pretended title to the aforesaid crown and of all lordship, dignity and privilege whatsoever. And also [declare] the nobles, subjects and people of the said realm and all others who have in any way sworn oaths to her, to be forever absolved from such an oath and from any duty arising from lordship, fealty and obedience..*

I have quoted my Church against Protestants. In charity I will not quote what the Protestant Churches said in response! Vilification, what Alexandra Walsham in the title of a wonderful book called 'charitable hatred', came from both sides. And of course both sides were riven by divisions. Luther had some very unkind things about Zwingli and rejoiced in the torture and massacre of Anabaptists. Erasmus may have been a great supporter of peace, but he condemned the worldliness of the papacy in scathing language, imagining Julius being denied entrance to heaven and threatening to bring a papal army to smash his way in!

I lament much more than I celebrate the Reformation because it gave rise to all this hostility. Verbal hostility was accompanied by physical violence. In 1641 as many as

12,000 Protestants were killed in Ireland by Catholic insurgents. Cromwell took his revenge a decade later - 2700 soldiers were killed in hot and cold blood (after surrendering to mercy) and probably 800 civilians were killed in hot but not in cold blood at Drogheda and in 1652 a law was passed to the effect that no Catholic could own land in 28 of the 32 counties of Ireland. There were similar developments in Bohemia. The Wars of Religion affected large parts of Central, Western and Northern Europe from 1524 to 1648. They ended with the Peace of Westphalia which recognised three separate Christian traditions in the Holy Roman Empire: Roman Catholicism, Lutheranism and Calvinism. These Wars were about many more issues than faith; but faith was the excuse and trigger. All kinds of mass discontent coalesced about magnetic poles of religion, and this is how the Wars are remembered.

I am one of those who think all this violence was unnecessary. There is lots of evidence that the medieval Church was healing itself. Erasmus's friends and allies were prominent at the courts and at the top of the Church in England (More, Colet, Fisher, even Wolsey), in France, in Spain, the Low Countries and elsewhere. They were also committed to programmes of mass education, of reducing the number of monasteries and shrines and founding schools from out of their assets (as also encouraging government and private endowment), of promoting universal peace and a re-formed theology arising from a proper understanding of the scriptures based on a study of the texts in the original languages. The theological underpinning was a much more benign one than the ones that resulted from the Reformation, with an altogether more optimistic view of human nature and human freedom. Alongside an Erasmian Re-formation from above, there is much evidence of renewal movements from below. All the main religious orders had powerful back-to-basics movements within them and in addition there were a series of movements with lay leadership or at any rate lay involvement (the Brethren of the Common Life, the Oratory of Divine Love) which were prayerful, non-materialistic movements embedded in everyday life. Of course the Roman Curia, and the papacy itself, were in a mess and there was little movement for reform there before the 1550s, and worldliness and corruption was still very easily found in the episcopate and religious communities of many places, most obviously in Germany and the areas Luther knew best. But the Church was not only capable of being renewed without schism, but it was being renewed.

Of course there were positive and lasting benefits of the Reformation process. It led to a much better general understanding of scripture and Protestantism nurtured much better general education than even an Erasmian reform would have engendered. The concept of the priesthood of all believers arguably led to a better understanding of individual responsibility. But the costs of schism and the legacies of persecution, of war, of hatred, may well outweigh the benefits - and in saying this I am not attributing blame for that violence.

One of the disastrous effects of the Reformation was the rigidity of confessional formulae with each side digging to defend things because they were dear to the other side. When the Catholics met in General Council at Trent (1546-63) they rejected much in the Augustinian tradition (because it had been 'corrupted' into Lutheranism and Calvinism), and Christian Humanism (because its hermeneutics and scholarly methods had been used by Protestants to reach very different theological conclusions and because Erasmians had tried too hard to win back Protestants by compromise, leaving Thomism in charge). No harm in that, unless one believes that healthy dialogue within

a Church is a good thing. And in reacting against Luther and Calvin, the Council of Trent upheld many matters of discipline rather than change something denounced by Protestants - the refusal to return to a married clergy or to give the laity communion under both species are obvious examples. The Protestants meanwhile were throwing out babies with the bathwater - not just closing down religious houses that were failing in their mission, but all religious houses (850 in England alone), tearing the heart out of a huge amount of social welfare as well as true learning and prayer for the world. And mainstream Protestantism did tend in the centuries that followed to replace the priest by the preacher as the guardians and conduits of truth. The Reformation did little to deal with the perennial problem of clericalism. Ask most of those who found themselves with a puritan minister in post-Reformation England.

I do not think *solafideism* is what defined Protestants against Catholics. Luther's soteriology is based on a radical reading of Paul and Augustine that many inside the Church could and did agree with. *Sola Scriptura* is distinctive, but in practice all Protestant Churches developed structures of authority that policed (indeed were founded on) readings of Scripture in the light of the Fathers and in the light of decisions of the medieval Church that soften its effects.

And indeed we need to remind ourselves that there were serious attempts at reconciliation down to the middle of the sixteenth century until the religious wars engulfed Europe. And some of them made tremendous progress. And up until the 1540s many Protestants were looking for compromise (proto-Anglican 'fudge?'). The Regensburg Interim of 1541 was based on the result of the previous conference between Roman Catholics and Protestants, involving leading Catholics and Protestants, the latter including Bucer, Melancthon and Calvin (but not Luther), at which an agreement had been reached on the idea of justification and most other disputed points of doctrine and discipline. It would have been the kind of fudge that often resolves major conflicts (watch out for what happens with Brexit). Eventually the Pope and Luther rejected it, but the fact is that very leading figures across the divide did believe in the possibility of the schism being healed. And I wish it had been.

Major issues would have remained. For me, the crucial irreconcilable point of dispute between Catholics and Protestants was how salvation was to be achieved. I have come to the view that the most prominent articulation of this distinction can be found in the idea of the 'communion of saints', the idea that the living can pray for the dead and vice versa, and hence in the sacramental system: Catholics in the Reformation believe that individuals can do their bit to help achieve their salvation; Protestants that salvation is God's gift alone. If there is one neuralgic issue that demonstrates a gulf opened up by the Reformation that still divides us mightily, it is the doctrine of Purgatory. When I read Matthew 28, the greatest of all the parables, the parable of the sheep and the goats, I say 'thank Heaven for Purgatory' for there is much of a sheep and much of a goat in myself and in most people I meet. I have yet to find a Protestant who agrees with me about this! That is certainly a legacy of the Reformation.

It matters, but it matters less than all the things I can celebrate together with other Christians, a fundamental agreement on the fallenness of Man, the Incarnation, the Atonement, the Resurrection and the call by a God who shared in our humanity to restore us a share in his divinity. I remember that Jesus came to found the Church not the Churches and I hope and believe that he can reunite that which we have wilfully

dis-united.

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