

RECONVERSION

By KEVIN PETHEBRIDGE

LET ME START by saying that I feel that I have no traditions to be liberated and further that *discovery* (rather than *reconversion*) would be a more appropriate description for my situation. My only established position that could be described as tradition was my baptism. I am a slow mover. At no stage had I abandoned any faith—mine was a movement forward in a faith that was slow in developing. I shall try to relate this later to the Churches in their development. My position was not even renewal—it was something that was almost stagnant, but there was the spark that needed fanning by the Spirit, waiting for the right moment to restart the fire which had been engendered at the time of baptism.

As I started to reflect on my faith—its origins, its nurture, its establishment, its development—I found it hard to explain. I had taken so much for granted. I had not always been conscious of the action of the Holy Spirit working in me and in people who surrounded me, leading, challenging, inspiring, questioning but always moving forward, sometimes faster than others, sometimes seeming to go back but quickly recovering once the impetus had started. I have not been able to establish with any certainty the precise time at which that impetus began. The growth had been slow in my early years, then a steady progress, later a faster progress. I sometimes regret that the fast-moving period had not been earlier, when the physical body was better able to cope with excitement and mental stimulus. On the other hand, there have been advantages for me in the timing of my movement forward.

I had the advantage of baptism as an infant—that reception of Christ and spark of the Spirit which I have come to see is the stamp of all Christians. The Spirit is like a tiny spark of fire that remains tiny until fuelled or blown so that it spreads. It smoulders, then flares up again so that it may spread. I may have been like a piece of dead wood; the cleansing fire spreads from me to other dead wood and new life is brought about after the fire. The fire of Pentecost brought out great talents from the disciples—theirs was the first example of unity in diversity. In the account from the

second chapter of Acts we are told that they heard the sound of that wind and the fire of the Spirit came to rest on the head of each of them. The assembled people were from all nations and cultures (just like us) and yet they understood the disciples. What a message for us! If we have the Spirit in us it must be possible for us to express ourselves so that we can understand each other.

It has been through experience that I come to realize that the Holy Spirit has worked in me and through those around me; and that the Spirit works in different ways and at God's own pace (which sometimes seems to vary from ours). This experience has been contrary to my human make-up, for an introvert needs a good deal of stirring or 'firing'.

I am fortunate to have had a caring family (of which I am now the oldest surviving member). I come from a long line of mixed (inter-Church) marriages—in each generation, for some time, there has been a Roman Catholic, but in no case has the 'other' partner become a Roman Catholic at the time. Children of these marriages have not necessarily been brought up in the Roman Catholic faith but in each generation at least one has 'adopted' that faith. Is it any wonder that I am an ecumenist? And what does this mean for the theologians? For me it means unity in diversity, with the Holy Spirit always in charge of the situation.

My very earliest childhood involved Roman Catholic care and nurturing, but not long enough to include instruction in the teaching of the Church. The next experience was a rather stark contrast—my closest childhood friends in a small suburban community were Brethren (who would now be termed Fundamental Christians). They were good friends, they regarded me as one of their family and inevitably I became involved in some of their worship activities. I was fascinated by their close relationship with God but not (as I look back on it) with Christ or my Holy Spirit. Even at that age I was surprised that they quoted scripture but the quotes were taken out of context and there seemed to be comparatively little study of the texts. I must have been happy that God was still part of my life.

Enter the Anglicans!—or should I say, in those days, the Church of England? For some reason (the Holy Spirit) my parents, with very little consultation, had chosen to send me to a secondary school conducted by the Church of England. I had dearly wanted to go to the government high school as most of my friends from the state primary school would graduate there. However, this move

became my greatest delight. Apart from those studies which were within my competence I became very interested in the religious teaching which was a new challenge. Here, it seemed to me, was the full teaching of the Christian Church (it had never occurred to me to look beyond the Christian Church). It was here that life started to take on some meaning for me. For the first time I came to realize that the life which I had been leading (quite comfortably) actually had some meaning, that there was a future, that God was not just a benevolent old man who looked after us all and punished us at the appropriate times. I came to see that God had a plan for creation, that his son Jesus Christ was in all of us and that his Holy Spirit was here to guide us to carry out his will for all people and not just for me. What a revelation! Is it any wonder that I now say to my Roman Catholic friends 'Thank God for the Anglicans'? At this stage I started to develop an interest in worship and every other aspect of Christian life. The opportunity was given me to develop myself as a Christian—to study scripture, to worship as a body rather than giving personal testimony, to build a social consciousness and to be aware of my position in that society.

I am a slow reactor. After all this time it is very seldom that I come forth with an instant response. The blazing of my Anglican fire was followed by some smouldering and a quiet spreading of it. I was becoming aware of other Churches which had not previously engaged my attention—Methodist, Congregational, Baptist, Presbyterian. With my Anglican teaching I was beginning to appreciate the centrality of Christ in the life of Christians, but it was also beginning to concern me that they each had some strong emphasis on one part of the Christian message but for some reason were not sharing it with others. They were really in competition with each other. They clearly resorted to scripture as a reference for their actions and witness but it seemed to me that the question of unity, fellowship, community was being confined within a particular tradition. At this time of course I was also discovering the Roman Catholic Church.

Alberic Stacpoole, O.S.B., writing in *The Month* (February 1983) quotes Karl Barth in terms which express my concern so well:

It is an impossible situation that whole groups of Christian Communities should exhibit a certain external and internal unity among themselves and yet stand in relation to other groups of equally Christian communities in an attitude more or less of exclusion. It

is an impossible situation that such groups should confront each other in such a way that their confession and preaching and theology are mutually contradictory, that what is revelation here is called error there, that what is heresy here is taught and revered as dogma there, that the order and cultus and perhaps the ethics of the one should be found and called alien and strange and unacceptable and perhaps even reprehensible by the other, that the adherents of the one should be able to work together with those of the other in every possible secular cause, but not to pray together, not to preach and hear the Word of God together, not to keep the Lord's supper together. It is an impossible situation that either tacitly or expressly, with an open severity or a gentler friendliness, the one should say to the other, or, in fact, give it to be understood, or at any rate think of the other: You have another spirit; you are not within but without; you are not what you presumptuously call yourselves, the community of Jesus Christ.

Any coming-together had to start with the establishment of trust.

By this time I had married a Roman Catholic whom I had known all my life, but was still not ready to commit myself to any one community of Christians. I was concerned about the lack of unity, the scandal of divided Churches, the bad impression created within the secular community. I was coming into contact with more Roman Catholics (clerical and lay) and I was influenced by their dedication and sincerity. My interest in worship was revived and here was something new to me—the centrality of Christ was being so clearly expressed in the Eucharist. Here was that spark of the Spirit kindling the fire again. I felt encouraged to pursue my interest in this area. I must have realized that this was God's offer to me as it is to all people and I must make a response. It was probably my first operation of consciousness. Experience with my diverse collection of Christian friends involved prayer. I have suggested that it was a sign of their unity but certainly it was unity in diversity, for their attitudes to prayer took so many different forms, from the strictly formulated prayer to entirely spontaneous, to personal spoken testimonies, to anonymous written petitions, to silent contemplation. Through all this comes the most acceptable to all—the Lord's prayer—and what a wonderful all-embracing simple communication with a loving father it is! I would like to take it apart and express what I feel about each segment but others have done that far better than I could. I want to relate just one part of it briefly to the question of conscience—the will of

God. Whenever we pray that *his* will be done, we are surely not asking that a previously arranged set of guidelines will mysteriously come upon us.

I consider that I am asking God for his guidance in my thoughts and actions (and in forming my conscience) so that this action of the Holy Spirit will help me in the selection of all other teaching and my own thoughts in making my decision in particular circumstances. His will applies to changing situations rather than being a standard set of rules to be applied to set situations. This helps me to become aware of God and of others. My sin offends God only by doing harm to myself and to others. This personal formation of conscience seems to apply also to the Churches as communities. Every decision that they make as a community should call for an examination of conscience, of how this action will affect other Christians as well as themselves, and of course how it relates to the teaching of Christ. This also means that if Christians contemplate taking some action that may be contrary to the current thought of other Christians, they should consult with those others to determine whether some better understanding of the situation could be reached.

My personal journey was now set on a track. The destination was clear but the track would be not quite straight—it seems to have a few bends and it is certainly rough in parts, for many reasons. The vehicle, however, is still fired by the same means with which it was first fired.

Ecumenism has crept into many parts of my story though I had not recognized it. The vital moment was when I eventually recognized that the whole body of Christians was Christ's Church and that by becoming a 'practising Catholic' I could do more towards becoming a Christian and influencing others to recognize Christ as the centre of our lives. I saw the mission of Christians not so much as introducing Christ to the world as making others aware that Christ is already in them, waiting to be acknowledged, to welcome them into the kingdom of God.

It is fascinating to realize that discovery is something that continues all one's life. It is connected with the search for truth. Some would say that with my reception into the Roman Catholic Church I had been presented with the whole truth. My question is whether the whole truth has already been revealed or whether what has been received needs to be examined and built upon. It seems that it should be the aim of the Church (and the Churches,

and every individual member) to search for the full truth under the inspiration of the Spirit. For the disciples, the Spirit was to remind them of what Jesus had said, to deepen their understanding, and to *lead* them into the whole truth. The same Spirit is surely still leading *us* into the whole truth—the present-day disciples need the support of each other in seeking this truth, for each one must have something special to contribute, according to what they have received from the Spirit. Also by this time I had chosen my vocation in life. I had completed my training as an architect and had started in private practice.

I was fortunate in that my direction into the Catholic Church had presented me with an understanding of the Church which was not upset but rather confirmed by the documents of the Second Vatican Council. I had been made aware of my responsibilities as a layman to share in the pastoral life and to make available whatever talents I may have. Thus my interest in the liturgical movement developed, with the aim of contributing whatever I was able without expecting that interest to promote my professional career which I saw as something separate.

A self-imposed condition of my re-entry to the Church, of which I had become a part at baptism, was to consider it an obligation (and not an optional extra) to work for the unity of all those who professed to follow Christ, which would eventually help to bring all people to God. Jesus had prayed (John 17) not just for the world but 'that the world may believe'.

The division of Christians involves suffering for those who are concerned, whose conscience advises them that all is not right. The great majority of Christians are avoiding that suffering because of their apathy—they have not yet released themselves from those traditions which have failed to present them with the full picture of the Christian message. Their baptism called them into the community of faith, becoming members of the Body of Christ and sharing his mission. The ecumenical movement is directed at bringing these people to the realization that if they claim to be Christians they must follow the mission that their Christ gave them. Achievement of unity may involve a change of mind and a change of heart in most of us.

The suffering may come about from having to relinquish thoughts and practices which we had held dear. It may, on the other hand, come about from having to be patient, to wait for others to ponder the problems which we had thought could be

solved easily. Is it Christ's wish that we should be united? And what does that unity mean? He prayed (Jn 17,17-26):

Sanctify them in the truth; thy word is truth. As thou didst send me into the world, so I have sent them into the world. And for their sake I consecrate myself, that they may also be consecrated in truth. I do not pray for these only, but also for those who believe in me through their word, that they may all be one; even as thou, Father, art in me, and I in thee, that they also may be one in us, so that the world may believe that thou hast sent me. The glory which thou hast given me I have given to them, that they may be one even as we are one, I in them and thou in me, that they may become perfectly one, so that the world may know that thou hast sent me and hast loved them even as thou hast loved me. Father, I desire that they also, whom thou hast given me, may be with me where I am, to behold my glory which thou hast given me in thy love for me before the foundation of the world. O righteous Father, the world has not known thee, but I have known thee; and these know that thou hast sent me. I have made known to them thy name, and I will make it known, that the love with which thou has loved me may be in them, and I in them.

This passage contains so much of the message: truth, prayer, mission, hope, unity in diversity, love.

I am encouraged in the 'movement forward'. Having taken what was, for me, a bold step, I had complete confidence that I would be guided by the Holy Spirit. I had been convinced that God operated not only through the authority of his Church but individually through all his people. I have been heartened by so many experiences and through reading so much more than I had ever read previously and especially through the documents of Vatican II. More and more I have been experiencing the operation of the Spirit through the Church as a body, as a community. In 1 Peter 2:

You are a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a consecrated nation, a people set apart to sing the praises of God who called you out of the darkness into his wonderful light. Once you were not a people at all and now you are the People of God; once you were outside the mercy and now you have been given mercy.

Communicating with other Churches is listening and responding—building on our understanding, releasing us from the

language and structures of the past, going beyond the context of past conflicts to rediscover the real message. This has been the great strength of recent dialogue between Churches—the Anglican Roman Catholic International Commission (ARCIC) which is continuing, and the Faith and Order Commission of the World Council of Churches on Baptism, Eucharist and Ministry (BEM). Only the most enthusiastic of us would have believed that our hopes of twenty years ago would have reached such ‘substantial agreement’. Many other dialogues are continuing at all levels, mostly bi-lateral including Anglican, Roman Catholic, Lutheran, Reformed, Orthodox, Disciples of Christ, Baptist. The statements which receive publicity are produced by theologians but they require study at all levels and their reception must be by all the People of God, to ensure their rightful place in the activity of the Church, for the growth of the united Body of Christ.

If we are aiming for unity in diversity, unity must be in mind and heart, diversity in gifts or talents. The studies bring us together in mind but this will be of no avail unless we have the desire for unity and the love and trust that will put to an end the long tradition of bigotry, of competition, of looking in but not seeing Christ. St Paul speaks of the variety and unity of gifts in 1 Corinthians 12 and of unity with peace in Ephesians 4:

There is one body and one Spirit, just as you were called to the one hope that belongs to your call, one Lord, one faith, one baptism, one God and Father of us all, who is above all and through all and in all. But grace was given to each of us according to the measure of Christ's gift. Therefore it is said, ‘When he ascended on high he led a host of captives, and he gave gifts to men’ . . . And his gifts were that some should be apostles, some prophets, some evangelists, some pastors and teachers, for the equipment of the saints, for the work of the ministry, for building up the body of Christ, until we all attain to the unity of the faith and of the knowledge of the Son of God, to mature manhood, to the measure of the stature of the fulness of Christ.

Subjects such as Eucharist, Ministry, Justification by Faith which seemed to be such inseparable obstacles to unity have come to be seen in a different light, to be expressed in language that is understandable to common people in our time, and uncomplicated by side issues which were relatively unimportant. My story includes some involvement in these areas. As I grow older and my energy

decreases I am content to leave many areas to those who are more competent—I am satisfied to have raised questions and stimulated thought.

However, my story would not be complete without more reference to personal and public prayer. I mentioned earlier how it was apparent that all the Churches were finding it easier to come together in prayer once the motivation had been given them. They found that they were able to meet in family-size groups, in parish groups, in large gatherings. Their prayer took different forms—informal, charismatic, formal liturgies—using music, audio-visual aids, movement, quiet contemplation. The liturgical movement has developed into an encouraging sign of unity—agreement in forms of worship, in design of buildings and setting of atmosphere for worship, sharing of Churches and exchanging preachers and readers. The fervent hope of most of those in the ecumenical movement is that some agreement may soon be reached about the sharing of the Eucharist. This division is the greatest pain for those who believe that when agreement on Eucharist and Ministry have been reached, it is unfortunate that only discipline should keep us apart.

How can I sum up this story? I recognize that God has been with me all my life. More than half this life has been spent in discovering him, in coming to acknowledge that an offer had been made to me and that I needed to respond, to accept the offer and then to become aware of my responsibility. I still recognize that my main responsibility is to see his Church united. My hope is that I may grow in Christ, that I may play my part in making people aware of Christ's presence in them and in our world, which will bring them peace and justice and unity. May that spark of the Spirit which was implanted so many years ago continue to fire as long as it is God's will for this particular person.