

Ecumenical Conference “parables of Communion” – 20.10.2016

Dear brothers and sisters in Christ,

We are pilgrims on a journey. We are making our way together to our true homeland, the Kingdom of Heaven. The Kingdom is already among us here and now, but at the end of the journey we will be given to experience its plenitude which is full communion with God and with all our brothers and sisters in humanity. Our pilgrim way should lead to the visible unity of the Church for which Christ prayed on the eve of his passion. Jesus' prayer that we may all be one was offered so that the world may come to believe.

Long ago, the Hebrew people made their way through the desert, as they headed in the direction of the Promised Land. Their desert journey must have seemed to them to be endless. In fact, it lasted forty years. For that epoch, forty years was a full life time. Should we not deduce from this that we are called to live our whole life walking on the path to unity?

As they made their way through the desert many of the Hebrew people became discouraged; they began to grumble and voice their annoyance with God that the end still eluded them. Like the Hebrews in the desert, many of us may be feeling discouraged today because the prospect of the Church's visible unity seems to be far removed from us – and even to grow more and more distant as time passes and new differences between us arise. The way to unity appears to have become more and more complex. At times we may form the impression that we have all become somewhat stuck in the mud and are no longer making any real progress. We might even despair and conclude that we are getting nowhere.

Dear sisters and brothers, **to persevere** with faith, hope and love is the call addressed to us by Christ. It is essential for us to journey together in this frame of mind and attitude of heart as we pursue our way, longing to arrive at the visible unity of the Church. Yes: **to persevere** with faith in the Lord's promises, with hope that our expectation will not be disappointed, filled with respectful mutual love. This should be the essence of the pilgrim way we walk together.

We journey together toward the visible unity of the Church, coming from **different Christian denominations**.

What does our denominational belonging mean to us?

Let me share a question with you -a question which rises in my heart fairly regularly. Why am I Roman Catholic? I am Roman Catholic because my parents were Roman Catholics. If I was born into an Orthodox family or a Protestant family, then, in all likelihood, I would be an Orthodox Christian or a Protestant. The point I am wanting to make is this: few of us have personally chosen our Christian denomination. Most of the time we belong to the Christian denomination of our parents! And often this does not pose a question for us.

Our Christian denominations are means – precious and indispensable means – to help us walk toward the Kingdom. But none of our denominations is the Kingdom. Our denominations **are means, not the end**. Let us be honest. Each one of our denominations has its own particular emphasis and its own unique beauty. But each one of our denominations – mine included – can be short-sighted when it comes to one point or another. All denominations have their blind spots which prevent them from seeing the full picture. This realisation should put us on our guard against making of any of our denominations, with their institutions and their theologies, an absolute, a kind of incarnation of the whole truth, in other words an idol. Our denominations should not be considered as strongholds in which we take refuge against others, and from which

we might judge and condemn others. It is sad when our denominations function as strongholds wherein we shelter, closed in, held by fear of those who are legitimately different. Our denominations far from being seen as a threat by others should each be approached as a source of riches for others within the wider ensemble of the Church Universal.

If we are pilgrims who are journeying together, then we are on the move! As we walk, there should be **circulation of life among us**, dialogue and exchange between us. We must be careful not to be enclosed in our own particular denominations, living therein a kind of self-sufficiency, absorbed in an attitude of self-satisfaction or self-justification. We cannot live with a mentality of the besieged. It is not good for us to be always on the defensive. Together we have to listen to God and speak with Him. Together we have to listen to and speak with one another.

What we are living here this evening – and all these days – serves as a good parable of the life we should be continually experiencing with each other. Together, on this Hill of Down, we stand on holy ground. On this spot, many centuries ago, stood a Benedictine monastery. The Abbey of Downpatrick had been founded by the Monastery of Chester and Chester had been founded by Bec, that famous Anglo-Norman Abbey which was the monastic cradle of St Anselm, Lanfranc and so many other monks who left their homeland to go to England to enrich the life of the Church there. At the time of the Reformation Downpatrick Abbey disappeared and this place eventually became the Church of Ireland Cathedral of Down. This evening four professed monks (and one professed nun) of the Roman Catholic Abbey of Bec are present and participating in this service. One of them is even an ecumenical canon of this Church of Ireland Cathedral. Another ecumenical canon of this Cathedral is a Methodist minister. This points to the circulation of life between our Christian denominations of which I have spoken. For this grace we have to be thankful. In this, a way forward is hinted at and pointed to. Here we have a parable of how the relationships between our Christian denominations should be: a sharing of riches, a sharing of particular graces.

On the path to unity, **a healthy curiosity and a little humour** are necessary. We belong to different denominations. Each one of these denominations exists and has its specific riches. We have to discover these riches, rejoice in them and even come to love them. We have to be ready to exchange them with one another, ready to receive from and give to each other. We should be inhabited by the desire to know and understand each other better. This growth in knowledge is a vital first step if we are to master and silence our irrational fears before each other's differences. Let me share an experience with you. I remember staying for a few days in the Monastery of Chevetogne in Belgium. During my stay there, I participated in the community's patronal feast: the Exaltation of the Holy Cross, which was celebrated liturgically in the oriental rite. This was not my own liturgical background. It was not something to which I was used, but I kept my eyes and my ears wide open, and my mind was filled with questions. I was anxious to understand and learn. I discovered that a healthy curiosity and even a little humour are good for us on our ecumenical pilgrimage. Words, which Dom Lambert Beauduin spoke to our late Abbot Dom Paul Grammont, as they both participated in a Russian Orthodox liturgy many years ago, come to mind: *Enjoy it. Enter into the fun of it all.* Mutual knowledge and understanding – and even a little dose of humour – can serve to dissipate our fear of the unknown and create instead a sense of communion, as we rejoice in and appreciate our legitimate differences.

Together we form Christ's pilgrim Church made up of members of different Christian denominations. To appreciate what the Church is, made up of our different denominations, I will have recourse to two images.

Some Fathers of the Church loved to speak of the Church as **the mystery of the moon**.

The image of the moon to speak of the Church was drawn to our attention by a Methodist friend of our Community, the Rev Richard Clutterbuck, when a few years ago he came to the monastery to deliver a series of lectures on the mystery of the Church. Before very long, yet another person drew our attention to that image once again. That other person was none other than a certain Cardinal Bergoglio, who used it in his three and a half minutes speech delivered to his fellow-Cardinals just before the last conclave. Bergoglio's speech was decisive. It decided of the future of the Roman Catholic Church for the years ahead - the years in which we now find ourselves. I quote: "The Church is supposed to be the *mysterium lunae* – the mystery of the moon. The mystery of the moon is that it has no light but simply reflects the light of the sun. The Church must not fool itself that it has light of its own; if it does that, it falls into what Henri de Lubac in "The Splendour of the Church" called the greatest of evils: spiritual worldliness. That is what happens with a self-referential Church which refuses to go beyond itself". (End of quotation.)

The mystery of the Church as the mystery of the moon reminds us that the Church is not the source of the light, the Church is not the light. The Church receives the light from Christ. The Church is a reflection of the light of Christ. What is true of the Church in its ensemble is also true of each one of our denominations. Our legitimate and necessary belonging to a particular denomination should not lead us to forget that the light of our own denomination is Christ. The mission of our denomination is to reflect the light of Christ, and not just to radiate its own light. Let us never make an absolute or an end of our denominations. They are not the light. Their mission is simply to reflect the light of Christ.

Another image of the Church is the image of a **mosaic** composed of a multitude of small coloured stones.

Each baptised person is a stone: each one is unique, beautiful and created in the image of God.

Each Christian community is a gathering of stones and a beautiful part of an ensemble.

Each denomination is a gathering of communities, a bigger part of the ensemble.

But the real beauty of the mosaic is in the great ensemble. Each individual stone gives the best of itself in the wonderful mosaic. Each community, each denomination needs the others in order to reflect the beauty of the mystery of the Church which includes not only our own particular generation, but all generations.

Are we convinced of this?

My denomination is beautiful, but my denomination is much more beautiful in communion with the others. Your denomination is beautiful, but it is all the denominations in communion with one another which give an idea of the true beauty of the Church Universal, the spouse of Christ, a reflection of the mystery of God, a living icon of the Living God offered to the world.

Let us leave the last word to Pope Francis. I quote: "We must never forget that we are pilgrims journeying alongside one another. This means that we must have sincere trust in our fellow pilgrims, putting aside all suspicion or mistrust, and turn our gaze to what we are all seeking: the radiant peace of God's grace. Trusting others is an art and peace is an art. Jesus told us:

“Blessed are the peacemakers”. In taking up this task, also among ourselves, we fulfil the ancient prophecy: “They shall beat their swords into ploughshares”.

Sisters and brothers, let us continue our journey together. Let us not lose sight of the goal set before us: the visible unity of the Church. Let us pursue our pilgrim way in hope and with joy, our eyes fixed upon Christ. We shall not be disappointed. Amen.