

## CLONTARF WPCU 2016

### *Exordium*

A few years ago, I was teaching a programme in the *Church of Ireland Theological Institute*. Towards the end of the course—by which time the students had become aware that they could ask anything—an interesting question was addressed to me. Do you regret the Reformation?

### *Probatio 1*

This is a very interesting question to put to a member of the Order of St Augustine, a latter-day confrere of the great Martin Luther (of whom we *used* to be ashamed!). To respond, I made use of a comparison, the partition of Ireland into two jurisdictions, Northern Ireland and what eventually became the Irish Republic. I regret the partition of Ireland, not for nationalist reasons, but because of what the division made each of us become: a species of theocracy each with an oppressive majority. Had the division not taken place, the unbalanced power of the Catholic church or the Orange Order would surely not have evolved the way it did. In that sense, I regret what the division *made each of us become*. As for the Reformation, I cannot globally regret an event which triggered such new life into the church, enriching incomparably the Christian experience. But I do regret what the separation made each of us become.

### *Probatio 2*

For us in Ireland, this is a year of commemoration as we look back to 1916. Off the island, a more important celebration takes place next year, the 500<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the Reformation. It is a long time, but only 25% of the two Christian millennia. In the last 100 of those five hundred years, great strides have been made towards mutual respect, affection and reconciliation. It all began, as you know, with the *World Missionary Conference*, held in Edinburgh in 1910. The issue raised there was the exporting of European divisions to new mission territories and the undermining effect of divided witness. Eventually, the Roman Catholic Church came to see that the Holy Spirit had been very active indeed in the churches of the Reform and joined the ecumenical movement. The last 50 years have seen substantial progress in dialogue and agreement. I'll mention a few examples. The *Porvoo Agreement*, dating from 1992, is a tremendous project, bringing together the national churches of the Reformation in northern Europe and it has enriched local church experience even here in Dublin. Between the Lutheran Federation and the Catholic Church, an agreement was signed in 1999. The *Agreement on Justification* resolved, at least in theory and principle, the central theological issue of the Reformation. There is great progress in Ireland between the Methodist Church and the Church of Ireland, expressed in a covenant of mutual recognition in 2002. I saw the fruit of that myself at the episcopal ordination of Pat Storey as Bishop of Meath. A long and fruitful dialogue has taken place between the Roman and Anglican churches, leading to recognition of a deep common faith, with remaining differences charitably identified. These discussions are now in their third phase. A remarkable summary of achievements thus far was published in 2007—well worth taking up and reading. It is called *Growing Together in Unity and Mission*. The title echoes that of the original conference in Edinburgh—and rightly.

The issues facing all Christian churches today in Europe, in the UK and especially here in Ireland, are twofold. The first is the question of belief in God at all. The context is the cultural presupposition that such a conviction reveals a weak-minded attachment to the past. The engine behind much of that cultural attitude is the “evangelical” atheism of some social commentators and some scientists. There is, therefore, a need for a new apologetics of faith. I myself am very impressed by the English philosopher of religion John Cottingham. Two of his titles may entice you: *Why Believe* (2009) and the more recent *How to Believe* (2015).

Alongside suchlike approaches to faith as such, there is also a need for a new presentation and defence of the gospel and of the person of Christ. Richard Clarke's book, *Is Christianity True?* raises the question precisely. Today all the traditions face the same challenge of virtual extinction unless we address the culture robustly and address the culture together. The future

of the Christian project will depend on such dialogue as well as a renewed focus on the person of Jesus and on the Word of God. We need much more of this in the public sphere.

In my own Church, the growing centrality of both Scripture and the person of Jesus points to significant convergence. Preaching at Easter in 2013, the bishop of Rome said:

Let the risen Jesus enter your life, welcome him as a friend, with trust: he is life! If up till now you have kept him at a distance, step forward. He will receive you with open arms. If you have been indifferent, take a risk: you won't be disappointed. If following him seems difficult, don't be afraid, trust him, be confident that he is close to you, he is with you and he will give you the peace you are looking for and the strength to live as he would have you do.

The teaching is plain, the message life-giving and these words could be on the lips of any preacher in any Christian tradition. As St Paul might say, with so much to keep us together, what is it that keeps us apart?

### *Probatio 3*

A final comment: the resolution of 500 year-old debates is not sufficient to bring about full communion. Over the centuries, new issues and challenges have emerged, often to do with ethics and ministry, occasionally combining. These days, these issues can be as much intra-church as inter-church, as we see from the recent Canterbury meeting of Anglican Primates or the Catholic Synod of Bishops on the family. The fault-lines are no longer simply between churches. Many of us feel we have more in common with other churches than with aspects of our own. The turning point is often quite classical: how do we bring the Gospel into our own time and how do we relate Scripture *and* tradition. There is much to discuss and debate as we face the future.

### *Peroratio*

I leave you with two questions. The first is the one addressed to me: do you regret the Reformation? To my mind, the answer must be no and yes. No, because so much vitality was released and so many rich ways of being a disciple. Yes, because of distorted identity and divided witness. I agree with Gordon Linney, writing recently in *The Irish Times*,

This does not mean ignoring the great theological and spiritual enrichment that came from the Reformation or desiring to go back to the time before it. It means instead allowing all of Christianity to benefit from its achievements, once they are freed from certain distortions due to the heated atmosphere of the time and of later controversies.

The second question is: were to from here? We will move only if we are willing to take risks. The progress at official level is good and real. We need to go a step further and identify doctrines which are not church dividing. As always, upper level conversation will take flesh only if matched by a similar progress at ordinary parish level. Already this is happening in many places, but certainly not enough. I propose taking risks. It should be possible to grow together in faith: I have in mind such things as bible study groups, *lectio divina*, baptism preparation, joint pastoral support of mixed marriages, the education of the young in the faith and so forth. This is not really for the clergy, already over-stretched. It is really for the communities of faith to come together and create shared environment of celebration, learning and prayer.