

FORWARD IN FAITH

NATIONAL ASSEMBLY 2019

**ITEM 4: Address by the Rt Revd Robert Byrne CO,
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(the English and Welsh Anglican-Roman Catholic Committee)**

It is a great opportunity for me to be here this afternoon: thank you very much. You are able to listen to my ‘home spun’ thoughts about the unity of our churches and a little about the work of what is now the English and Welsh ARC. I am particularly pleased to have the opportunity to say goodbye officially to Colin Podmore as he enters a new phase in his life. Colin, thank you for all the support that you gave to English ARC, for your courtesy, for your kindness, and for your openness in our discussions. In fact, I have just been to a meeting of English and Welsh ARC in Leeds, and they send their best wishes to you, as does my Co-Chair, Bishop Christopher Foster of Portsmouth.

English ARC – or EWARC, as it is called now, because the Welsh are now involved, is probably the most unknown ecumenical group in the country. I think most of you will have heard of ARCIC, which is an international body, whereas ARC is a national dialogue between the Roman Catholic Church in England and Wales, the Church of England and the Church in Wales. Its first meeting was in the library of Westminster Cathedral on Monday 20 April 1970 – almost fifty years ago. It wasn’t until 1972 that the purpose of ARC was defined as:

‘the positive fostering of Roman Catholic and Anglican relations in England, and the co-ordination of future work undertaken for this purpose by our two churches.’

Of course, the dialogue began in response to the Vatican II document on ecumenism *Unitatis Redintegratio* of 21 November 1964. This is and remains the blueprint of the ecumenical conversation for the Roman Catholic Church. This document, like all conciliar documents, should be read in the light of tradition and the consistent teaching of the Catholic Church. Here the dual emphasis is on reform and continuity, on the freshness of conciliar teaching and yet its deep creative continuity with history. We also need – and I think this is crucial and often forgotten – to read the decree on ecumenism in the light of the Apostolic Constitution on the Church, *Lumen Gentium*, which was also promulgated on 21 November 1964. We can only understand how the Roman Catholic Church relates to other Christians through the understanding she has of herself which we find in *Lumen Gentium*. The People of God, a Pilgrim People, ‘walking on the way’ as Pope Francis reminds us, is a theology which sits comfortably with the idea of encounter and listening which is at the heart of the ecumenical journey.

None of us can any longer see ourselves in ‘splendid isolation’ in the face of the secularism and indifference we see around us. I know that Forward in Faith has a deep appreciation of the apostolic and patristic teaching of the Church. Consequently, there is much we can do as churches to work together to bring about a deeper understanding of the historic roots of catholicism and therefore a credible witness of Christ in the world.

We need a starting point, though, in our ecumenical relations, and as people who see and appreciate the historical roots of our common faith, we might best begin by acknowledging our faults of the past. I am convinced that any truly genuine ecumenical dialogue begins with repentance. It is human frailty and sin that bring about division in the Church. We see it in

history, we see it indeed in our own day. We need a self-critical and penitential attitude. We need the humility to listen and learn. This is fed mainly by prayer and contemplation, rather than controversy and point scoring. Cardinal Walter Kasper once said: 'Ecumenism rather than an exchange of ideas is an exchange of gifts.'

It cannot be doubted that our ecumenical endeavour is firmly based in the gospel. On the night before he died the Lord prayed:

'May they all be one, just as Father, you are in me and I am in you, so may they be in us, so that the world may believe it was you who sent me.'

Unity, then, is an essential part of our witness as Church to the world. It is a prayer and command of the Lord. It is an essential part of the Gospel message, and therefore a part of the nature and mission of the Church. Unity is at the heart of our life in Christ and not an optional extra for enthusiasts. God's will is that all people and the whole of creation should be drawn into unity with the Father through the death and resurrection of his Son. To be a Christian, then, is to be ecumenical.

My belief is that our growth together will only come about when we learn to pray and listen together. The concept of spiritual ecumenism is mentioned in the Council document and has been developed in recent years. The growth of Lent groups, joint services of the Word, joint retreats and the study of spiritual writers are a way forward and encouraged by English and Welsh ARC. I personally also believe that our monastic communities can play a crucial role in encouraging us to come together, to be a place where we can come to pray and listen together.

The Pontifical Council for Christian Unity published in 2004 'A Handbook of Spiritual Ecumenism'. It states that *'prayer for unity is the royal door of ecumenism, it leads Christians to look at the kingdom of God and the unity of the Church in a fresh way... Spiritual ecumenism also requires a change of heart and holiness of life arising from Jesus' call to conversion. The way towards reconciliation and communion unfolds when Christians feel the painful wound of division in their hearts, in their minds and in their prayers. The experience makes them aware of how much harm has been caused by pride and selfishness, by polemics and condemnations, by disdain and presumption. It also awakens in them a readiness to engage in a serious examination of conscience regarding their faults and trusting in the reconciling power of the gospel.'*

It seems to me, after several years' experience in EWARC and other dialogues, that our ecumenical future also depends on friendship. We can create an ambience where we feel safe and respected in each other's company and free to express our deepest beliefs and desires. The growth of friendship and respect for each other are a sure seed bed for honest and fruitful development. We have much to be grateful for in the way we have grown together. Suspicion has given way to trust and friendship. Shared prayer and mission have become the norm at local level and what was new and unfamiliar in the 1960s has become very much the norm today.

So there is much to thank God for and indeed to celebrate in the ecumenical achievements of the last fifty years. The work of what is now English and Welsh ARC is a part of that achievement. We are also aware of the many joint documents agreed between our churches which have contributed to a deeper theological understanding between us. The most established conversation of course, is that of ARCIC, the international Anglican – Roman Catholic dialogue, which is an international body.

At the same time, we have to admit that the optimism of the 1960s has given way to the pragmatism of the early 21st century. There are those who say that the ecumenical journey is over and dismiss it as a failed experiment. Times have changed; perhaps what we then perceived as a possibility of unity is no longer so, at least for the present. There is a change of situation in various churches with the acceptance of women's ordination and other gender issues, which become boulders on our way. The theological conversation has changed and what formerly united now divides. Nonetheless, although full and visible unity eludes us, more than it did fifty years ago, the fostering of positive relations is as relevant now as it was then. To grow in understanding of our shared faith and disagreements today may well lead to our full sacramental unity in the future. The ecumenical winter could easily turn to spring, but without continued dialogue the green shoots of spring cannot rise. We know that what we are doing is the work of Lord's work, and he will not fail us.

Archbishop Sir David Moxon, formerly the Archbishop of Canterbury's representative in Rome preached in Leeds Catholic Cathedral not long ago and said:

'If we feel we are in an ecumenical winter, if we ever feel that nevertheless this sacred energy keeps flowing and coursing through the world, this energy comes from the cosmic Christ, Christ crucified, risen, ascended and glorified. It cannot be doubted that the first flush ecumenical enthusiasm has waned but it shouldn't stop us having a clear idea of the principle of unity which is the Holy Trinity and its goal which is full and visible communion.'

(I think that is the most important point of all: that the aim of any ecumenical dialogue must be full and visible communion.) He goes on to say:

'These may seem at times eschatological hopes rather than concrete aims but as we believe our unity is found in and through our common baptism then it is only in the reality of Christ's reconciling presence in our lives that a true unity can be found. If we feel ourselves inert or stuck ecumenically there is this deep source of inspiration and power which is available to us no matter how impossible things are, no matter how large the obstacles in front of us. All we have to do is remember this reconciling grace and immerse ourselves in it as baptised people and members of his Church.'

So we shouldn't feel too discouraged if our ecumenical journey is in the slow lane. We must persevere in our efforts and try to appreciate that the seeds we are sowing will bear fruit in times to come. That is why the notion of spiritual ecumenism is so important, in that it grounds our ecumenical journey in the heart of Christ and helps to realise that it is his work we are undertaking and not our own. When Christians learn to pray together and learn from each other how to pray then Christ is able to use us for his own purposes.

The role of Forward in Faith is important in the understanding of our churches in growing together. Your mission, as I understand it, is to witness in the Church of England to its apostolic faith based on the Creeds and the Fathers and to promote and maintain catholic teaching and practice within it. This offers an opportunity for us to share what we believe to be the overarching tenets of our faith and to understand more profoundly not only what we hold in faith but also how we can come to a deeper respect and unity together.

It struck me this morning, when we were talking about the Seal of the Confessional, that as Anglicans you have a unique role, but also a unique privilege, in being able, through the General Synod, to enact legislation. The Seal of the Confessional is something in which we might well be able to help each other. Cardinal Nichols only last week said that any priest would rather die than in any way break the Seal of the Confessional. [*Applause.*] I can only say that the Roman Catholic Church will never change its stance on that. We can help you by

giving that witness. You can help us in maintaining it in English law and reminding the Government of that very very important part of our faith.

It is often by looking to the witness of others that we can find a way forward together. You will not be surprised that, as an Oratorian, I was honoured, pleased, thrilled to attend the canonisation of John Henry Newman in Rome last month. John Henry Newman is for both our churches a beacon of faith in a sceptical world, an example of pastoral love in a world where love has grown cold.

I am sure that no one would be more surprised than Newman to find himself a canonized saint. In his own life time it was suggested that he led a saintly life. His response was : ‘I have nothing of the saint about me as everyone knows and it is a severe and salutary mortification to be thought next to one.’ Touchingly he concluded, ‘It is enough for me to black the saints’ shoes – if St Philip uses blacking in heaven.’ Nonetheless the Church thinks otherwise, and after due deliberation and the approval of two miracles brought about by the intercession of the saint, John Henry Newman, the Londoner born in 1801, who died a Cardinal of the Holy Roman Church in Birmingham in 1890. is now raised to the honours of the altar. He is held up to us as a model of Christian life and virtue and as our intercessor in heaven.

Perhaps we should ask ourselves what kind of saint Newman is and what he can say to the Church in our day. It was Pope St Paul VI, who said: ‘Guided solely by love of the truth and fidelity to Christ, he arrived at the fulness of wisdom and peace.’ It was, in other words, the saintly Cardinal’s relentless and heroic search for truth and holiness which brings us to celebrate him.

It was while the young John Henry was still at school in Ealing that he underwent what he later called his first conversion. In 1816 he became, in his own words, ‘convinced of the existence of myself and my creator’. This was no mere intellectual realisation but an inner conviction that he was subject to a divine authority and bound by a definite dogma. He surrendered himself completely to God’s will and began his lifelong search for truth and holiness. He now had, as he said, ‘that vision of the Unseen which is the Christian life’. He felt himself to be God’s creature, and responsible to Him – God’s possession, not his own. It was this first conversion that was to inform the life of our new saint.

We often think the turning point in Newman’s life to be his Reception at Littlemore in October 1845, but it was for him a natural progression of growth into his ideals. It cost him much to give up his family, friends and a career. Indeed, he joined a church that he did not know, and indeed a church that he did not particularly like. It cost him much, but his lifelong dictum was ‘holiness rather than peace’, and it is this determination that made him a saint. The pursuit of holiness and truth were for St John Henry the driving force of his life. We see throughout his long life how he championed the cause of revealed truth and was fearless in proclaiming it, not only by his many writings but also by the institutions he established. He did much to promote the Christian cause in bringing the Congregation of the Oratory to England, founding a University in Ireland and a school in Edgbaston. He worked tirelessly as a parish priest and had a fatherly care for his Oratorian community. He guided countless people with his letters of spiritual direction and counsel. He gave light to those who were searching for the truth and continues to do so through his published works of theology and philosophy, his sermons and prayers.

There is every indication that this saintly Cardinal will be proclaimed a Doctor of the Church. If that is the case, it will be for three reasons: his teachings on the primacy of conscience, on role of the laity in the Church, and of course on the development of Christian doctrine. If St John Henry is declared a Doctor of the Church for any of these reasons, this will greatly help

the cause of ecumenical dialogue in our islands, because it will give us a deeper understanding of his teaching and that of the Christian Church. His ideas will mature and advance our conversation. Newman to my mind is a truly prophetic thinker, whose writings and thought can do much to answer the problems of our age. Faith and doubt, individualism and relativism were seen by him as the way humanity in which was going, and indeed we see in our own day a full flourishing of those ideas. It is Newman who can give us weaponry, as it were, to understand and fight those tendencies.

The new saint also had a great gift of friendship. His motto 'Heart speaks to heart' shows that, like St Philip Neri his patron, he achieved his aims through friendship as well as a spirit of prayer and promoting the importance of beauty in art and music. There are those who see him as the dry intellectual in opposition to the charismatic and joking Philip Neri. Nonetheless John Henry was firstly a son of St Philip, imbued like Philip with a charism of making personal contact with individuals, together with a profound psychological insight and love of each of them, in order to bring them to a deeper friendship with God. Both made this the major pillar of their apostolate. Again, our ecumenical interface with the world is one which needs to value the individual as a unique creation of God, with his or her own dignity as a child of God. Respect for life and human dignity are at the heart of the Gospel and our dealings with human beings. To remind people of the transcendentals of truth, beauty and goodness, which are our touchstones with God, can do much to contribute to the health and welfare of our society in our increasingly brutish world. A catholic understanding of the world is one (I mean that in the widest sense) is one where we see goodness in all created things and celebrate it in our lives and through the beauty of art, the liturgy, and music. Newman can teach us much in this.

In conclusion, I would say that we should keep our conversation going. My maxim, to those who say that ecumenical conversation is dead, is quite simply to retort: 'It is better to have friends than enemies.' To continue our conversation in a spirit of faith and friendship is powerful witness to the world, for whom our divisions are no more than a curious anomaly. In future generations our successors will be grateful that we kept this conversation going. We sometimes need to see and appreciate things in the wider sweep of history. Our emphasis should be positive, in that we can learn much from each other and celebrate those things which unite us rather than those which divide us.

The witness of our forebears in faith, especially the English saints, Bede, Cuthbert, Anselm, Hilda, Dunstan to name a few, can help us all to appreciate our common heritage. There are those in the Anglican and Roman Catholic tradition who point us to a greater unity: not only St John Henry Newman but also the other members of the Oxford Movement, great divines of the Church of England, who did much to witness to our common faith.

So, as we move forward in time, we do so with hope and the knowledge that Christ will be with his Church until the end of time. We don't know what it will look like and how many members it will have. Nonetheless we know that our witnessing now will have a direct effect on the future. Christ has no hands but ours, so let us at least use them for his glory and the unity of the Church.