

# Receptive Ecumenism's Distinctive Contribution

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I have been asked to say a few words about the distinctiveness of Receptive Ecumenism relative to other forms of ecumenism.

The first thing to say is that Receptive Ecumenism is an odd kind of ecumenism. It presupposes and values other kinds of ecumenism but it does not just repeat them or reduce to them. It is possible to identify certain similarities and connections between other forms of ecumenism and Receptive Ecumenism; particular ways in which they each give some precedent for what Receptive Ecumenism variously develops. But none of those other forms of ecumenism are just the same as Receptive Ecumenism.

Looked at in one way, Receptive Ecumenism can be viewed as placing particular strategic emphasis on some basic dispositions that have always been essential to any real ecumenical progress. We might think here in particular of the dispositions of humble self-regard and openness to learning from the truth of the other. As a way of recognising this, I have sometimes quoted the subtitle of William James famous lectures on Pragmatism and described Receptive Ecumenism as *A New Name for Some Old Ways of Thinking*. Well, that is both true and yet not the full story. To the extent that it has some truth about it, I now want to complement that phrase by also saying—as I have also said before—that Receptive Ecumenism is not just a new name for anything whatsoever that sails under the ecumenical flag. It is not just a new descriptor for whatever we were each already doing.

On the one hand, for example, Receptive Ecumenism presupposes and greatly values the emphasis on positive relationality and being with each other that is characteristic of Life and Work ecumenism but Receptive Ecumenism does not just settle for that alone. Receptive Ecumenism wants real growth and change *within* each of the churches and not just warmer relationships *between* the churches. It views the different ecclesial traditions as being on a real journey to full and real structural and sacramental communion with each other—not uniformity but differentiated communion—and it is committed to that vision of the ecumenical endeavour no matter how long a journey it is going to be.

On the other hand, whilst, as this suggests, Receptive Ecumenism very definitely seeks to serve the traditional goal of Faith and Order ecumenism, it does this neither by seeking to overcome and collapse difference in service of an undifferentiated commonality, nor by encouraging the separated churches simply to reconcile themselves to long-term, unresolved substantive difference as the permanent state of things.

By contrast, Receptive Ecumenism serves the traditional Faith and Order goal by looking, in the first instance, not at the difficulty of the continuing separating differences *between* traditions but at the experienced difficulties *within* respective ecclesial traditions and how each church, as it walks its own pilgrim way, is called to growth and conversion. Moreover, Receptive Ecumenism encourages us to do this not simply by looking inward at our own church's same old logic and standard ways of thinking and being but by asking what we might fruitfully learn in such regards from the respective gifts of our ecclesial others.

Frequently the tendency in ecumenical encounter is the other way around: to see the apparent difficulties in another ecclesial tradition and to consider what they might, in our opinion, need to learn from us; as though we are complete and that their learning from us and becoming more like us would solve their apparent problems and limitations. Friends, you might be forgiven for thinking that that is a game that Catholics have been particularly skilled at playing! But let me suggest that it is, in fact, an attitude that we can all carry within us. The others are the problem and we know what would fix it, if only they would listen to us. But it is an attitude that leads to stasis. In this way of thinking, each is settled, protective of what we have, and not open to moving and changing.

By contrast, whilst Receptive Ecumenism encourages us to be willing to help when we are asked, it does not intentionally focus on our own assumptions about other's perceived needs. Rather, it encourages us to place primary intentional focus on our own difficulties and needs, and the possibilities that are open for fruitfully learning from our ecclesial others in these regards, in the hope that by so doing we might become more fully and freely ourselves – as we are called to be. This gives us the language of 'dynamic integrity' that is associated with Receptive Ecumenism.

Receptive Ecumenism marks the further maturing of the ecumenical process. It means we have gotten beyond formalities and beyond showing our best sides to each other to actually being honest with each other as to the real state of things, warts and all. It also marks the multiple humblings of the churches, as we have each been forced, whether we like it or not, to take a long, hard look at ourselves, e.g. in light of the sexual abuse crisis. This gives us the image of Receptive Ecumenism as an ecumenism of the wounded hands: we show our wounded hands to the other in the hope that the other can minister to us from their strengths. There is both need and desire here; recognised difficulty and hoped-for possibility.

Of course, the attitudes of humble self-criticism, of openness to learning and receiving from the other, and of commitment to walking the way of ecclesial conversion have all always been present in ecumenical engagement at its best. What Receptive Ecumenism does is to take that from the realm of background context and brings it to the foreground in an explicit, programmatic fashion.

With that, what Receptive Ecumenism also does is to work this out in a disciplined fashion. Because the potential learning from the other needs to be done with dynamic integrity, it needs to be properly tested. This operates on three levels in accordance with three key questions:

- 1) Where are the points of existing resonance within the host tradition which enable the proposed creative reception to be explored?

- 2) Where are the points of difficulty, difference, and tension within the host tradition in this regard which require some reconfiguring if this proposed creative reception is actually to be performed/achieved?
- 3) And how can this be done with dynamic integrity maintained?

Even when the proposed learning is of a very practical nature—e.g., concerning mission strategy, or practices of discernment—this moment of theological testing is an essential part of the distinctive way of Receptive Ecumenism.