The origins of an ecumenical church: links, borrowings, and inter-dependencies

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The creed's confession that we believe in 'one holy catholic church' should not simply be understood as a doctrinal datum, but as an understanding of the Spirit's work based in the *experience* of the early churches. The churches did not exist as discrete groups with merely a common religious profession, but as nodes within a network. This network was established and maintained by constant contact and by those who saw it as part of their service/vocation to travel between the churches—and these human and physical links account for how the Christian Church as a whole developed; its common heritage in the writings it produced which became, in time, the canonical collection; and its awareness that, despite difficulties, such links were essential to its identity. This culture of links, of sharing and borrowing, could form a model for a practical way forward today towards a renewed *sense* of our oneness in the Christ.

Around 150 CE we get the first explicit mention of the one Church—encompassing all the communities of Christians—as itself an intrinsic element of the Christian faith. The statement comes from the *Epistula apostolorum* and takes this creedal form:

> Then when we had no food except five loaves and two fish, he commanded the men to recline. And their number was found to be five thousand besides women and children, and to these we brought pieces of bread. And they were satisfied and there was some left over, and we removed twelve basketsful of pieces. If we ask and say, 'what do these five loaves mean?', they are an image of our faith as true Christians; that is, in the Father, ruler of the world, and in Jesus Christ, and in the Holy Spirit, and in the holy church, and in the forgiveness of sins. (5,17–21).[1]

This text, the *Epistula*, presents historians with a wonderful array of problems such as how it relates to those texts, the gospels, which were at that time shifting in their status from being the standard and, possibly somehow authoritative, texts in use in the churches towards becoming the canonical texts of those groups by

[1] I rely on Francis Watson, *An Apostolic Gospel: The* Epistula Apostolorum *in Literary Context* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, forthcoming) for the dating and the translation of the *Epistula*. I am indebted to Prof. Watson for making available to me his work, ahead of publication, so that I could cite it here.

being placed on an equal footing with the 'the [Septuagint] scriptures.'[2] The *Epistula* also intrigues us as an example of how the churches were relating their liturgical practice—for this is a creed that bears the hallmarks of liturgy and we know, from later evidence, that it was used liturgically[3]—to what they considered to be their rule of faith. But there is also a much simpler question which this text calls upon us to answer: what was the actual experience of those Christians which brought the unity of the church to their attention?

For most of our history this question has not only not been asked, but was irrelevant to the questions we were then asking. The statement in the creed, as we actually use it, was taken a datum of faith, namely 'we believe in one holy catholic and apostolic church,' and then this statement was investigated for it antecedents—most notably in those texts which were privileged by being part of the Christian scriptures—and for the explication of that datum within the tradition. It was a fact testified from 'sacred scripture and holy tradition', and as such we need to look further for its origins than that it was part of the deposit of faith.[4] However, that approach fails to take full account of the historicity of Christian faith and the ways in which it developed. From this perspective of observing the churches actually growing and changing and becoming steadily more aware of the nature of their discipleship, we can view the issues that appear in the creeds as a response to the lived experience of Christians. In this particular case, it means that we must search for the experiences of those groups that gave them an awareness that they were not just isolated gatherings with a common religious outlook, but which led them to believe that there were real links between them, that they were related forming a single organism. What made them experience that there was more to the whole than that they could be categorized as instances of a species within the genus 'monotheistic religions'?

But if unity was real rather than notional, then they had to have some affective human sense of this such as that they valued unity, were affronted by disunity, and reflected upon the linking bond between them so that they saw it manifested through other qualities of their life, practice, and faith. Just as they know the church should be holy, so they know it was a network and not just a discrete group of devotees. It is this sense that, in reflection, allowed them to imagine themselves linked backwards

[2] See Thomas O'Loughlin, 'The *Protevangelium Iacobi* and the Status of the Canonical Gospels in the Mid-Second Century' in G. Guldentops, C. Laes, and G. Partoens eds, *Felici Curiositate: Studies in Latin Literature and Textual Criticism from Antiquity to the Twentieth Century: In Honour of Rita Beyers* (Turnhout: Brepols, 2017), 3–21.

[3] This creedal statement is often referred to the 'Der Balyzeh Symbol' (because it was found in the Dêr-Balyzeh Papyrus: for the text see the *editio princeps* in P. de Puniet, 'Le nouveau papyrus liturgique d'Oxford', *Revue Bénédictine* 26 [1909]: 34–51) and asserted to be 'no later than the fourth century'; however, its presence in the *Epistula* demonstrates that it at least as ancient as the *Epistula* (i.e., a mid second-century product) and, indeed, may be older for it seems to be a liturgical formula that has been adopted within the *Epistula* and thus given a dominical origin.

[4] For a recent and learned example of this process, one could look at Thomas F. Torrance, *The Trinitarian Faith* (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1988), 252–301.

in time to a common origin and linked laterally to one another so that they formed a common entity. Thus, a church was part of 'the church' because they saw it as actually connected with the community around Jesus through the apostles (i.e., it was 'apostolic'); and the groups were linked laterally in that it was a unity across not only the empire but across the human world (i.e., it was 'catholic').[5] But what experience could generate this ecumenical sense?

Mutual Dependency

We read the letters of Paul as a corpus of extant documents, but the fundamental basis of their availability to us is that the various groups—virtually entirely in the Aegean world—were not just believers but belonged to a physical network. Paul assumes that he lives within such a net. He takes it for granted that he can receive information from distant churches (we can speculate as to where he was located when he heard of the disputes that were taking place in the churches in Corinth that were the occasion for the letter we label 1 Cor) and that he can transmit a document to them. This linkage is not simply a matter of there being some postal service to which he had access—such as the imperial post—and that we then enquire about the about Paul's access to such a service. This network is a fact of the way the groups related to one another because he imagines that whenever one of the groups receive a letter, they share it with others and those others share their letter with them.

Rather than seeing the churches as independent units, the fact of our corpus of Pauline letters presents us with the churches as members of 'a religious book club' where these letters are shared around because those to one's own church are insufficient. The best illustration of this comes the Deutero-Pauline letter to the Colossians:

> Give my greetings to the brothers and sisters in Laodicea, and to Nympha and the church in her house. And when this letter has been read among you, have it read also in the church of the Laodiceans: and see that you read also the letter from Laodicea (Col 4:15–16).[6]

These sentences, usually ignored as but the epistolary wrapping for the letter's actual message, deserve the most careful reflection. First of all, it assumes that wherever Paul is located he can find someone who will carry the letter from him to Colossae—and that the recipients will not be surprised by this messenger's arrival. Second, that those in Colossae have links with the church in another city such that

[5] The vision of charity located by the narrative far beyond the Greco-Roman world in India that is a central part of the *Acts of Thomas* would be an example of this (while this text is probably early-third century, the geographical assumptions supposed in its audience must be older that this).

[6] This is the New Revised Standard Version.

they can send on greetings. Moreover, they know these other groups well, as is witnessed by the assumption that they know the church that meets in Nympha's house: there must have been contact between Nympha's church and themselves. Thirdly, it can be taken for granted that the Colossians will go to the bother and expense of having the letter copied so that it can be forwarded: whether that means just one copy (for the Laodiceans) or two (one also for Nympha's church) is unclear, but the survival of the letters as a corpus (witness P^{46} now in Dublin[7]) depended on multiple copies in circulation. Fourthly, the Colossians can expect the same service in return—so this sharing of letters (i.e., 'being part of the book club') is an on-going demand of being a church. And lastly, if one considers this letter, as I do, to be not from the historical Paul but from those who saw themselves as his disciples, then its evidentiary value in this case in increased because it witnesses to what could be taken for granted by anyone who was familiar with the communities of Christians. It is the conceit of the author that he knows what can be assumed by all as common knowledge and so be employed as tokens of verisimilitude in his attribution of the letter to Paul.

This network of links between churches, physical bonds in the material order, has been a theme taken up by some biblical scholars and dubbed by one 'the holy internet'.[8] Building on this network, scholars have challenged the notion that differences between texts, most notably between the four gospels, can be explained by the origins in distinct churches in which distinct needs were the spur to idiosyncratic developments. Based on the evidence of this 'holy internet' these scholars—most notably Richard Bauckham—have argued that we have to see the gospels as being composed for *all* Christians.[9] Moreover, it is clear from the survival patterns exhibited in our earliest, if fragmentary, codices that those gospels were valued not as isolated texts but were valued as a collection of texts over a wide area: not only were gospels for all Christians, but very many Christians valued the same collection of gospels.[10] But for our purposes we can reverse the logic of this argument to observe how the distinct churches perceived their relationships to one another.

If every church has more or less the same collection of gospel texts, along with other texts produced within the Jesus movement, then part of knowing that one had heard the gospel is the awareness that a key physical expression of this is the codices shared with other churches. One is a church not as an island standing alone simply having a common belief in Jesus, but as one location within the geographically scattered whole because all are holding these texts in common, providing them

[7] See J. Keith Elliott, *A Bibliography of Greek New Testament Manuscripts* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000 [second ed.]), 29–30.

[8] Michael B. Thompson, 'The Holy Internet: Communication Between Churches in the First Christian Generation' in Richard Bauckham ed., *The Gospel for All Christians* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1998), 49–70.

[9] See previous note.

[10] See Graham Stanton, *Jesus and Gospel* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004), 63–91.

for one another, and preserving them for one another.[11] If the message of the books is for all, then there is a sense of belonging to that 'all' inherent in the possession of those books.

But if this is the case, then it, in turn, assumes another forming of mutual dependence: actual human beings who move from one church to another performing a service to each church they encounter. That this is so can be grasped, to some extent, by everyone today who picks up a bible furnished with some maps (even if these are more often provided more for decoration than actual use).[12] Let us take the recent editions of Nestle-Aland as typical and note that it has a map of Paul's journeys as one of its endpapers. This shows Paul and his companions on their three paradigmatic 'mission journeys' founding churches coupled with a fourth journey from Jerusalem to Rome as presented to us in Acts. However, if instead of seeing this map as a guide to discrete events in the life of the Apostle, we view it as an image of the interconnections and travelling between churches (thus the map is not representative of four trips but represents hundreds if not thousands of journeys between groups) we have a glimpse of how the churches saw themselves. In this case it is not as individual groups with common features and aims, but as related to one another and depending upon one another. While one should note that this feature of Acts is an expression of the ecumenical vision of Luke as he imagines the apostles bearing witness 'in Jerusalem, in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth' (Acts 1:8), it is also the case that his account would lack credibility if that level of connection between churches did not exist. For example, Luke describes the believers in Rome, on hearing of Paul's coming, travelling to meet him on the way (Acts 28:15) which assumes that communication—and so travel—between the churches was an everyday occurrence. But what was the nature of this inter-church travel?

When we examine the *Didache* alongside the lists of ministries in 1 Cor 12:28 and Eph 4:11–13, we see not only travellers of various kinds, but encounter the assumption that each church needs the gifts of the travellers to become what it is called to be. Paul's listing in 1 Cor is our oldest indisputable evidence, and he mentions as those 'appointed in the church, first apostles, second prophets, third teachers; then [doers of] deeds of power, then [those with] gifts of healing, forms of assistance, forms of leadership, [and] various kinds of tongues.' From other references within Paul's writings, and with the *Didache* as confirmation, we know that the first three groups—apostles, prophets, and teachers—are seen as link people moving from church to church. For all we know there may be cases where teachers and prophets are firmly based in just one church, but most of our evidence indicates

[11] See Thomas O'Loughlin, 'Ὑπηρέται...τοῦ Λόγου: does Luke 1:2 throw light on to the book practices of the late first-century churches?' in H.A.G. Houghton ed., *Early Readers, Scholars and Editors of the New Testament* (Piscataway NJ: Gorgias Press, 2014), 1–15.

[12] See Thomas O'Loughlin, 'Maps and Acts: a problem in cartography and exegesis', *Proceedings of the Irish Biblical Association* 21 (1998): 33–61.

that they are moving from church to church. The final chapter of Romans presents us with a few details of the travels of such ministers. Phoebe of Cenchreae is going to Rome—presumably as one sent from one church to another: we know from Rom 1:6 that there are women apostles. Prisca and Aquila appear to not only travel with Paul but among 'all the churches of the Gentiles.' Epaenatus, once in Asia, is now in Rome along with Mary who is known to Paul and, therefore, must have travelled there. Andronicus and Junia are prominent and long-standing apostles.[13] Paul also has come into contact with Ampliatus, Urbanus, Stachys, Apelles, the families of Aristobulus and of Narcissus, and his relative, Herodion—that he knows them from his travels and now knows they are in Rome indicates a level of communication that would be unexceptional in the case of the government or military, or indeed some traders, but what is remarkable is that these links are all in connection with a very small religious movement. And if that were not all, Paul then names thirteen others (not counting references to relatives) who are all taken to be 'workers in the Lord'. I consider this phrase of great importance: Paul is not simply sending greetings to those who happen to be in Rome, for whatever reason, whom he happens to know, rather he wants these people greeted with a holy kiss because they are in one way or another his fellow workers. And as fellow workers they have been moving between the churches.

The list in Eph 4:11–13 emphasizes that the Spirit builds the body of Christ through the variety of gifts, which viewed from the recipients' side are their skills, different members of the church have been given: apostles, prophets, evangelists, pastors, and teachers. The apostles, from their name, are the only group which imply movement: the emissaries of one church to another and their travels seems to form the 'hard wiring' of the whole network. On the other hand, the name pastor suggests someone who stays with a community and acts as a permanent guide. Whether or not the prophets, evangelists, and teachers were moving between churches or based in only one church is not obvious from this letter, but from the guidance given about their reception in the *Didache* it seems clear that they were all peripatetic.[14]

What did the travellers do?

Given the evidence for the extent of contact between churches, it is surprising that the purpose and content of this travelling is so opaque. The only explicit evidence we have for churches helping other churches—and with an elaborate network of contacts to facilitate this—is the case of the collection being made in the churches of Greece to provide money for famine relief for the churches in Judea. This very practical linking becomes a major concern for Paul and, in the medley of letters that

[13] See Eldon Jay Epp, *Junia: The First Woman Apostle* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2005); cf. J. Thorley, 'Junia, A Woman Apostle', *Novum Testamentum* 38 (1996): 18–29.

[14] See below.

we find in 2 Cor we can trace both his energetic promotion of this endeavour and his practical concern that it takes place efficiently.[15] But while this could be dismissed as a one-off crisis, it provides us with implicit evidence that the notion of helping each other, and the logistic capacity such assistance requires, could be presupposed.

When we come to the role of the evangelists our evidence is more circumstantial. At some time between the death of Jesus and the beginning of Paul's work (because he used the word 'the gospel' as a term already familiar among the followers of Jesus), some unknown theological genius brought the term 'the gospel' into use among the disciples. Here was a familiar term within the world of political relations whereby the ruler expressed his solicitude for a community, invariably a city, who in return became his 'friends' and subjects.[16] This term for the relationship established between God and his people through the Christ was readily comprehensible to a gentile audience in a way that words based around the word for 'covenant' (*diathēkē*) were not, and so the whole impact of the Christ-event could be expressed in terms of 'the gospel'. This gospel, in turn, came to be the stories of the life and teaching of Jesus that were told by specialist performers. So those who did this preaching—and we know there were many of them[17]—became known as such: 'the evangelists', literally: 'the gospellers', from their distinctive activity within the churches. We have to think of them as being specialist performers, the Christian equivalent of rhapsodes, who could come among a community, give a performance that related the gospel, perhaps left a text after them, and then moved on (presumably—as did Paul—adhering to the rules on their stay we find in the *Didache*). Moving on, but leaving a text which could be re-voiced in their absence, would lead to texts called after them, gospels, and allow us to see why the churches kept both a plurality of these texts and also why four of them—three of which are very closely related—became the familiar and standard library of each church preserved by that crucial, but forgotten, non-travelling office holder: the *huperides tou logou*.[18]

It would appear that no one church would be able to support a specialist like an evangelist, nor, presumably, would there be as much attraction in having the same performer every week when one could have variety! The performer of 'the gospel' was a guest in each church, and by each receiving from the next church, and then sharing a copy of the text of the performance with another, a unity of experience and memory was built. Borrowing from, and sharing with, other churches is the material

[15] See Hans Dieter Betz, *2 Corinthians 8 and 9* (Philadelphia, PA: Fortress, 1985).

[16] See Stanton, *Jesus and Gospel,* 2005.

[17] We know this not only from explicit references to there being many (Lk 1:1), but from the fact of the levels of redaction we find in the four canonical gospels, and from the fact of the other gospel texts and fragments which are either not in the canon or on its fringes (e.g., the *Pericope de adultera* (Jn 7:53–8:11).

[18] See O'Loughlin, 2014.

basis of the functional canon of the four gospels[19] that led to the prescriptive canon of those gospels we find towards the end of the second century.[20]

We all know that there is a massive difference between a born-teacher who can with their very being communicate, elucidate, and enlighten, and someone who has taken on 'the job' and whose labours produce a fitful transfer of information. The first is, from the Christian perspective, as witnessed in Eph 4:11, inspired and possessed of a gift. Even if a single community could support this person, the skilled teacher's gifts were to be shared between the churches. This teacher offered the gift of teaching in one place, then moved to teach in another community, then moved on yet again so that another church could benefit. What individual churches lacked in terms of this special gift was given them through borrowing and sharing. However, if we are thinking of those teachers in terms of our use of the word 'teacher' we may miss an essential aspect of their ministry. I have argued elsewhere that *didache* should not be translated as 'teaching' but as 'training'[21] because the Christian way was a matter of having a new way of living; and this required a training in the way of the Lord such as that we find in the 'Two Ways' section of the *Didache*.[22] If we think of these *didaskaloi* as trainers we see that they were sharing a common way of being a follower of Jesus and thus a common practice. It was this common practice, distributed over the churches by having common trainers, that may have given those with that shared way of living their most profound sense that they were one with every other person who had chosen and learned the Way. Shared training, as every army knows when it stresses common boot camp training, builds a unique spirit of unity between people. Would that today we could say that all Christians were being trained to act as Christians in such a way that when Christians met they would first experience a sense of their commonality rather than of their differences!

Lastly, we come to the third group, prophets, of whom we have the least information.[23] What service did a prophet offer? We know that they could speak in an oracular manner—for the *Didache* warns of those who did so for their own benefit.[24] We also know that they could perform some spectacular ritual while with a church—

[19] See K.W. Folkert, 'The "Canons" of "Scripture"' in M. Levering ed., *Rethinking Scripture: Essays from a Comparative Perspective* (Albany NY: SUNY Press, 1989): 170–9 for the notion of a 'functional' canon preceding a 'prescriptive' canon.

[20] See O'Loughlin, 'The *Protevangelium Iacobi,* 2017.

[21] See Thomas O'Loughlin, 'The Missionary Strategy of the *Didache*', *Transformation* 28 (2011): 77–92.

[22] Thomas O'Loughlin, *The Didache: A Window on the Earliest Christians* (London: SPCK, 2010): 28–45.

[23] On the identity of 'the prophets' and their place in the early churches, see J.A. Draper, 'Social Ambiguity and the Production of the Text: Prophets, Teachers, Bishops, and Deacons and the Development of the Jesus Tradition in the Community of the *Didache*' in Clayton N. Jefford ed., *The Didache in Context: Essays on its Text, History, and Transmission* (Leiden: Brill, 1995), 284–312; idem, 'Weber, Theissen, and "Wandering Charismatics" in the *Didache*,' *Journal of Early Christian Studies* 6 (1998): 541–76; and idem, 'Performing the Cosmic Mystery of the Church in the Communities of the *Didache*' in Jonathan Knight and Kevin Sullivan eds, *The Open Mind: Essay in Honour of Christopher Rowland* (London: T. & T. Clark, 2015): 37–57

[24] See text below.

again on the basis of the *Didache*—but its exact nature eludes us.[25] And we know that on account of their status, they were given certain freedoms in worship and were not considered part of the normal pattern of church life.[26] That is all we know regarding the details; but the two most significant aspects of their ministry is known by implication. First, the prophets were not considered as belonging within the community, but as visitors to the community: it was part of their identity to be itinerant moving from church to church. [27] Second, they were considered, despite their later disappearance, the most special of the visitors whom a church had to make welcome.[28] It is because of this uniquely high status that 'prophet' was so often the guise chosen by those who wanted to abuse a church's welcome. This group of charlatans was referred to disparagingly as the christhawkers (*christemporoi*).[29]

Problems

It is always a temptation of theologians to idealize their 'the early church' as some kind of perfect, springtime of youth, yet nothing is so reality-inducing as consideration of the processes of links, networking, and sharing between the early churches. Indeed, all the classic examples of how the early churches did not exist in some ideal privileged time relate to the churches as part of a network. It was failures in behaviour by a church in Corinth which gathered eucharistically that prompted Paul's rebuke: he had heard of the problems through the network and responded with 1 Cor sent though that network. It was the reluctance of other churches to share with the churches in Judea that prompted other letters. Moreover, it was because Paul was staying with churches as a visitor that criticisms of him arose in some of the churches. In turn, it was these criticisms that provoked his statements and actions in his own defense. He, Paul, did *not* avail of those standard provisions that were

[25] See David A. Clark, 'Order and Chaos in the *Didache*', *Journal of Pentecostal Theology* 25 (2016): 287–96.

[26] The *Didache* 10:7 says that 'the prophets should be permitted to give thanks in whatever manner they wish.' In the context it is clear that this refers to the offering of what we would call the Eucharistic Prayer as distinct from using the formula provided in the *Didache*. See Thomas O'Loughlin, 'The Prayers of the Liturgy' in Vivian Boland and Thomas McCarthy eds, *The Word is Flesh and Blood: The Eucharist and Sacred Scripture - Festschrift for Prof. Wilfrid Harrington* (Dublin: Dominican Publications, 2012), 113–22.

[27] See Draper, 1998.

[28] See Thomas O'Loughlin, 'Sharing Food and Breaking Boundaries: reading of Acts 10–11:18 as a key to Luke's ecumenical agenda in Acts', *Transformation* 32 (2015): 27–37.

[29] *Didache* 12:5. This fragment of early Christian slang has gained a standard translation in English since the discovery of the *Didache* with the word 'christmonger' formed in English by analogy with 'ironmonger' and 'fishmonger.' However, this rendering fails on two counts: first, '-monger' is simply archaic and does not contain any note of disapproval as would be contained in a word like 'chancer' or 'con artist'—an ironmonger is a perfectly respectable specialist seller of hardware—and so a word with a dimension of slur is needed; second, words in the form '-*emporos*' need to have some note of this being a travelling seller of goods, one who hawks his wares from place to place selling in market after market, place to place, or perhaps door to door. Therefore, I shall use the form 'christhawker which I hope conveys both a sense of slang reproof and of travel. I am indebted to my colleague, Dr Patricia Rumsey, for suggesting this form to me.

made for such inter-church travellers; therefore, he could assert his innocence of the charges.[30]

It is to the *Didache* we must turn for the clearest, explicit evidence that the system of links between churches could be problematic and was prone to financial abuse. Indeed, the *Didache* is so valuable as a guide to this phenomenon because one of its sections lays down 'a protective wisdom' so that a church's hospitality will not be abused by those travellers who, under the pretext of being ministers, would simply take the community's food and money.[31] The abuses took several forms ranging from the abuse of perks—a teacher coming, overstaying, and so having a free holiday—to fraud in the form of a prophet giving a revelation that he should be given a feast or that a collection should be taken up for his benefit. Bitter experiences, an obtuse indicator of the volume of inter-church traffic, had led to the production of a code of conduct to regulate the matter.

The whole code is worth reading:

> Now, whoever comes to you and teaches all these things which have just been set out here, you are to welcome him.
>
> However, if a teacher has himself wandered from the right path and has begun to teach a teaching that is at odds with what is set out here, you should not listen to him.
>
> On the other hand, if his teaching promotes holiness and knowledge of the Lord, then you should welcome him as you would the Lord.
>
> Now, turning to apostles and prophets you must treat them according to the rule of the gospel.
>
> Every apostle who arrives among you is to be welcomed as if he were the Lord.
>
> But normally he must not stay with you for more than one day, but he may stay a second day if this is necessary. However, if he stays a third day, then he is a false prophet!
>
> When he leaves you, an apostle must receive nothing except enough food to sustain him until the next night's lodgings. However, if he asks for money, then he is a false prophet!

[30] 1 Cor 9:1–18.

[31] See Aaron Milavec, 'Distinguishing True and False Prophets: The Protective Wisdom of the *Didache*', *Journal of Early Christian Studies* 2 (1994): 117–136.

Now if any prophet speaks in the Spirit he is not to be tested: for every sin can be forgiven but this sin cannot be forgiven.

However, not everyone who speaks in the Spirit is a prophet: only those who show that they follow the Way of the Lord. It is by the way that he lives that the true prophet can be separated from the false one.

Now if a prophet speaking in the Spirit orders a banquet, then that man should not partake in it; if he does eat the meal, then he is a false prophet.

And any prophet who teaches the truth, but does not live according to his teaching is to be considered a false prophet.

Any prophet, who has been proven to be a true prophet, who acts out in his life the earthly mystery of the church (provided that he does not teach everyone to do as he does) is not to be judged by you: leave his judgment with God. After all, the prophets in olden times also acted in that way.

Now if anyone should say in the Spirit 'Give me money'—or anything like that—you should not listen to that man; however, if he tells you to give something to other people who are in need, then he is not to be condemned.

Now anyone coming in the Lord's name should be made welcome; then you can test him, using your own insight into human nature to see if he is genuine or a fraud.

If the visitor is someone who is passing through, help him as much as you can. However, he is not to stay for more than two days—or three out of necessity.

If the visitor wishes to settle in your community, then if he is a craftsman, he should work for his living.

But if he does not have a trade, then use your own judgment to decide how he is to live among you as a Christian: but he is not to live in idleness.

> If he is unhappy with this arrangement, then he is a christhawker. Be on the watch for such people.
>
> Any true prophet who wishes to settle down among you is worthy of his food. In the same way, any true teacher is like a labourer who is worthy of his food.
>
> So take the first fruits of the vine and the harvest, of cattle and sheep, and present these first fruits to the prophets because they are to you, the high priests.
>
> But if you have no prophet settled in your community, then give the first fruits to the poor.
>
> When you bake a batch of bread, take the first loaf and present it as it says in the commandment.
>
> Do likewise when you open a fresh flask of wine or oil, take the first portion from it and present to the prophets.
>
> So also with money and cloth and other commodities, set aside the first fruits, and give it—as much as seems right to you—according to the commandment.[32]

These regulations of the travellers—which in a real sense can be said to form the earliest stratum of our canon law—were considered so important that they can be seen as 'the rule of the gospel' which I interpret as the regulations concerning the reception and celebration of that which is held in common between the churches. That the *Didache* was not out of touch with the actual situation in the churches in the late first and early second centuries can be seen in echoes in other documents, for example the dictum 'if they will not work, let them not eat' (2 Thes 3:10),[33] and in the close observance of these regulations within the accounts of the ideal visitors to churches (Peter and Paul) in Acts.[34]

That the *Didache* was dealing with a problem that was actually perplexing the churches indicates that the amount of travelling between the churches was so significant in both extent and importance that it could give rise to a group of people—

[32] *Didache* 11:1 – 13:6. The translation is adapted from O'Loughlin, *The Didache*, 161–71.

[33] This section of this letter sets a high importance on not supporting those who refuse to work and presents it as the command of Paul thus reflecting the kind of tension in the community we see in the *Didache*.

[34] See O'Loughlin, 'Sharing Food and Breaking Boundaries'.

given the disparaging name of 'the christhawkers'—who would exploit them and so the need for these rules to distinguish true travellers from false. More significantly for the longer term—but already visible *in nuce* in the *Didache*—this problem gave rise to a change in the form of ministry: the tasks once performed by the visitors became associated with the ministers, *episkopoi*, *presbyteroi*, and *diakonoi*, who were appointed from within the community. There were, presumably, seen as being less of a charge on the churches' resources and, since they were well known to the group, more accountable.

Travelling ministries in the explicit forms of apostles, evangelists, prophets, and teachers did disappear from Christian structures, probably sometime in the first half of the second century. For then onwards, any traveller arriving was more likely seen as an accidental visitor rather than someone engaged in their life ministry.[35] But those earlier wanderers left us an important legacy: the memory among the Christians that they were are not just single groups (which because of similarities of practice and belief could be classed together), but one church 'gathered from the four winds' just as each eucharistic gathering was a gathering from the four winds to be one in the Christ.[36]

Taking steps forward

If the appreciation of the gift of the unity of the Church was experienced in the practicalities of actions and practices that linked church to church, then if we wish to renew that experience we must not merely declare our desire for the unity for which the Christ prayed, 'that they might all be one' (Jn 17:21), but find practical ways that overcome the tribal tendencies in human nature that sets 'the others' in opposition to us and 'us' to them. Only when we experience commonalities, such that we experience 'them' as 'our people too,' do we have a framework within our mental maps that can give our ecumenical theology flesh.

Such steps in sharing and borrowing are not going to be easy to build: centuries of doing things apart mean that our practices seem *and feel* very far apart, we sound different, and we have a large stock of bitter memories and suspicions. Religions are conservative of their inheritances and we are attached to what we take to be the traditions of the fathers such than any borrowing or sharing that seems to depart from them is itself suspect and painful. Yet the perfection of the Church as the Lord's seamless garment requires that we see this as part of the process of repentance / conversion that is the first command of the gospel: 'The time is fulfilled, and the

[35] The famous journey of Ignatius of Antioch is a case in point if we accept—and the case is virtually irrefutable—the dating for Ignatius put forth by Timothy D. Barnes ('The Date of Ignatius', *Expository Times* 120 [2008]: 119–30) which places him in the mid-second century, if not slightly later.

[36] See the *Didache* 9:4 where the image of the in-gathering of the new people, fulfilling a prophesy, is part of the anaphora.

kingdom of God is at hand; repent, and believe in the gospel' (Mk 1:15). But pastoral wisdom also dictates that such practical steps should proceed by taking many small steps while keeping one's eyes fixed on the distant summit. What could some of those steps be like?

1. Become more aware of the other regions of the Church

We tend to work as theologians with those who share our interests and perspectives—a quite normal element among the adherents of any body of expertise: a conference of cardiologists wants to be sure that all participants have that specialization in common—but can any body of theologians ever have such a vision of comprehension? Whenever we speak about the divine, we do so from our fractured partiality: *Deus semper maior*. We cannot say anything completely; and we cannot ever say 'the last word' on anything: there is *always* another perspective to consider. One such perspective is that of those whose ecclesial experience is different from our own. In relation to our debates that perspective is a gift from another church which transforms the context of what we, as one group, say and so helps us towards saying something that might be closer to what we, as the *una sancta*, say.

Could we have a situation where whenever a group of theologians meet—even to discuss matters that only affected their own church or a particular cultural situation—that it becomes a standard practice that they have among them those who represent other churches and situations? Having these 'others' present is not part of some vague hope of yet another joint statement couched in language of mediation and diplomacy, but where the presence of that 'other' voice reminds the group that they are not the sole voice of the Church nor indeed just the tip of the ecclesial iceberg, but represent but a part of the Christian witness to the truth. Being nudged to keep in mind our particularity has the effect of alerting us to the whole, and that it is the whole that is the body of the Christ.

If such participation were a standard element in theological debate it would bring another benefit: the lessening of mutual misunderstanding. I have heard many Orthodox complain about how their position is not represented in its true light when Catholics seek, from their reading, to summarize their theology. It is a cliché that many Protestants are exasperated when Catholics tell them what they do *not* believe on the basis of how Catholic rhetoric has defined a position as 'Catholic' and, consequently, a non-Catholic is assumed to reject that position. I, as a Catholic, am often shocked by what Orthodox writers say is the position of the Catholics on this or that matter, and my immediate response is that it would have been so good if that writer had chatted the matter over—my use of an amicable informal verb is deliberate—with a Catholic theologian. Removing needless disagreements is a not insignificant step in ecumenism, while removing disgruntlement and annoyance is a real step towards promoting it.

2. Sharing resources in the training of clergy

An ecclesial culture of sharing, borrowing, and making connections will not mean much if it is restricted to those who consider themselves theologians. At the level of academic discourse such mutual learning is already taking place, and our meeting on Syros is itself a wondrous sign. The culture of sharing needs to be part of the world of those who are charged with being the teachers and guides of the People of God: the clergy. It is a constant amazement to me how little the clergy of individual churches know about the other churches that make up the Church. One way to lessen this gulf in knowledge would be to seek mechanisms that link the ministerial training centres so that the students in each institution are not only aware of the others, but mingle with each other. Faced with the ever growing financial burdens of training—look for a moment at the spiralling costs of library resources in a digital age—there are practical benefits in every such collaboration that would underpin, practically, the cultural and educational collaboration that might take place among the students. Is it too much to dream that an Orthodox seminary professor would swap places with Catholic seminary professor for a term or semester?

Immediately one hears the cry that if such a teacher exchange occurred then 'we' would be allowing an unacceptable alien influence into the minds of our ordinands! If such an objection were to be sustained, then we should admit that it is tantamount to holding that what divides us is heresy so serious that we cannot acknowledge that the other is genuinely a Christian—and I have met some in the Orthodox, Catholic, and Protestant camps that take that view and often express it intemperately. But such an approach is self-contradicting in that in denying the unity of the Church to be anything more than uniformity with one's own position, one must engage with an ever-decreasing circle. The *una sancta* was established by the reality of seeking to ever extend the links between one church and another. There is also a practical reply to this objection: the clergy formed in the various seminaries are, in contrast to even a few decades ago, unlikely to serve in situations where they will only meet Christians belonging to their own church. In a world of people movement, there are often more 'brands' of churches on a city street than there are brands of supermarket; and in this situation, those who serve need a deep familiarity with one another and to know how to co-operate in practical details. Some months ago, I spoke to a small group of clergy from several western churches in a meeting room located next to the Roman Catholic church building. From its window I could see the blue and white dome of an Orthodox building and asked if they took part in any joint activities. The reply is fascinating: we never thought of asking them, 'we would not know how to talk to them'! In such a situation genuine ecumenism is still far below the horizon.

3. Adopting common solutions

The glue that bonds many relationships is the practical one of borrowing: Only a fool seeks to re-invent the wheel, while only a bigger fool rejects an idea on the basis of 'not invented here.' It was just such borrowing that produced the corpus of Pauline letters, the corpus of the gospels, and so many of the building blocks of the liturgy. *Phos hilaron* did not become common property of our evening worship by the *diktat* of a council or a patriarch, nor as a result of the uniformity that is a function of printed texts, but because church borrowed from church.

The western churches are currently re-discovering the wisdom inherent in such borrowing in seeking a solution to one common problem. The lectionary that was inherited from the middle ages was not well arranged: the individual lections were often very badly formed, it had a very limited range (and within the gospel, lections give a very limited selection of stories and parables) and, most significantly, was not very useful for any system of preaching / catechesis based on the actual readings. But, with all its faults, it was continued in the Roman Catholic liturgy as promulgated by the Council of Trent. This is not surprising, but what is surprising is that it was adopted by almost all the churches of the sixteenth-century Reformation who retained a lectionary. Its faults were largely invisible to Catholics because the readings were in Latin rather than in a living language and because the readings were seen as 'merely' part of the 'Mass of the Catechumens' which preceded the eminently more important 'Mass of the Faithful.' However, the Reformed churches, despite using local languages and emphasizing the importance of the promulgation of the word continued to use that lectionary without demur. It was only in the period after the Second World War that the Evangelical Church in France identified its weaknesses and began designing a new lectionary build around a three-year cycle that would, in effect, use all of the gospels presenting the word of each evangelist in a way that respected the actual text (allowing that every lectionary is a compromise). With the coming of the Second Vatican Council—and with it the prospect of a move from Latin in worship—Roman Catholic scholars began to note the problems with the inherited lectionary. In an earlier time the mere fact that a Protestant church had gone in one direction was sufficient to spur Catholicism to go in the other: there should, in the imagery of that ecclesial culture, be clear blue water between churches, and there should always be a certain sneer at the changes 'they' made to 'accommodate modernity.' Happily, the opposite course was taken and the basic idea of dividing the four gospels over a three-year cycle and with a clear reading plan within each year became a fact in the *Ordo Lectionum Missae* of 1969 which has been in force now for half a century virtually always in the local language. While appreciation of the new lectionary has been patchy at parish level, for a complex of reasons, it has had an effect beyond Catholicism that was not foreseen by any of its designers. Church after church from the traditions of the Reformation have taken

up the idea and adopted it to a greater or lesser extent. In most cases they have not taken over the Catholic lectionary in its entirety—different churches have identified what each sees as a weakness in it or opted for the other opinion in cases of compromise—but they have, almost entirely, kept to its core structure: the gospel lectionary for Sundays. Indeed, many churches that traditionally rejected the notion of a lectionary as a limit on the Spirit have come to see the benefits of a lectionary and adopted either the Revised Common Lectionary or a set of readings close to it, but invariably this means they use the system of Sunday gospels.

This wondrous, and unplanned coming together based on borrowing ideas from one another has prompted a statement from Anglophone liturgists some years ago which declared:

> For the first time in history, Christians in the English-speaking world are using common liturgical texts. In the process of coming to agreed common texts, scholars from different Christian traditions agreed on principles for the translation from the earliest sources. This in itself has been a gift. Despite only having been in existence for a relatively short time, these texts have been adopted freely by an ever-increasing number of churches. We celebrate this. They are being experienced as a gift, a sign and a way to Christian unity in our diversity. As the churches continue to discover the riches of these shared texts, we believe further revision is inappropriate at the present time. We invite all who have not yet explored these texts, and those who have departed from their use, to join us in prayerful reflection on the value of common texts and careful consideration of the texts themselves. Prayed together, shared common texts become a part of the fabric of our being. They unite the hearts of Christians in giving glory to God as we undertake the mission of the Gospel.[37]

This is a very interesting vision of the *una sancta* and a very different approach to ecumenical progress. This ecumenical vision is not a deduction from a theological first principle nor an enforcement that is seen as filling out a confession within the creed: such impositions 'from the top-down' rarely achieve more than token success. Rather this is a bottom-up ecumenism: each church makes a discovery of the value of the lectionary—and so borrowing from another church—for itself. Then based on this practical experience it discovers other 'good things', such as praying together and witnessing together. It is only then in reflection that it sees this whole process, which each set out upon with the needs of their own liturgy in mind, as part of a much greater ecclesial event which is itself a gift from God. They have not become one, but grown toward unity through borrowing and sharing. This is a unity

[37] The English Language Liturgical Consultation, *The Reims Statement: Praying with One Voice*. This 2011 statement can easily be accessed on the internet.

in diversity for while they are each using the common texts with all the benefits this brings; each is using it to fulfil its particular needs and adapting the lectionary to those precise needs.

Similarly, this growth towards a single lectionary has not been the result of some great ecumenical big bang! If one had asked the framers of the *Ordo lectionum Missae* in 1969 how could one get churches from across the western Christian spectrum to adopt a more or less common lectionary they would probably have answered with a statement of the need for a common ecumenical agreement among the authorities of all the churches involved, perhaps a great synod at which it would be promulgated, and then a decision as to the precise moment it would come into force. Anyone with any experience of inter-church affairs, anywhere in the world, knows that this is a utopian vision. To get all the churches who have actually adopted the common lectionary to agree beforehand to come together and then agree on a lectionary would have been impossible: many would not agree to such a great event, others could not come if someone else was willing to come, and the debates among those who actually turned up would have been interminable! If such a synod did succeed in producing a lectionary, then many in each church would have rejected it precisely because they considered its origins tainted, while it would also have generated counter proposals that would have caused further divisions within some churches. Indeed, if suggested *ante factum*, any reasonable ecclesiastic would have laughed at the idea one could have such ecumenical support for a lectionary as fanciful.

That there are churches across the western ecclesial spectrum, and in a wide range of languages, all using one lectionary—and their seeing this as a mark of their unity—is due to the process by which it came about. Each discovered something good for themselves, fulfilling their internal needs, and adopted it. It was now their own possession resulting from their own decision, but it was also a link to a whole network of other churches, and each was benefiting from the sharing. Here also we have a curious demonstration that this bottom-up ecumenism model, based on borrowing, is the way forward more generally. If there is one western church, which uses that new lectionary, where it is *not* appreciated, it is among Catholics. I have been writing and speaking on the lectionary for over thirty years and am amazed at how few clergy have ever given it a thought: it is just there as that which is to be followed. Likewise, one can speak to group after group of lay Catholics who volunteer 'to read at Mass' on Sundays, and when one points out that there is a three-year cycle of lections, it comes as news.[38] The lectionary had been followed as that 'commanded for use', but it has not been actively adopted as a precious element of liturgy nor have its possibilities been appreciated. It was just promulgated and—given the value Catholicism gives to uniformity in liturgy—it was expected that all

[38] See Thomas O'Loughlin, 'Sharing the Living Word: Looking at the Lectionary as it approaches its golden jubilee', *Music and Liturgy* 43 (2017): 8–13; and 'Hearing the Gospel in the Churches: Reflecting on the *Revised Common Lectionary*', *Methodist Sacramental Fellowship* 145 (2018): 3–15.

would use it. They have (more or less), but it is often just a passive uniformity. It is useless now to speculate if it would have been better to offer it as an option and see if individual clergy would have adopted it as 'the better alternative'. But it is noteworthy that while those who have been part of a process of choosing a lectionary have seen the advantages, albeit with limitations, of their choice, Catholics are almost unaware of it. This year, 2019, marks its golden jubilee, but how many dioceses are having any events to mark it?

The spread of the new mid-twentieth century lectionary among the western churches is a little-known ecumenical success story, but, perhaps more importantly, it is a model ecumenical progress among all the churches. It has not spread beyond Catholicism as part of a grand ecumenical strategy, nor does the spread involve some affirmation, explicit or implicit, of a source of authority such as a patriarch or council, it has spread because it was a better way of each doing what they knew would enhance their own ecclesial reality. That now we can see a greater dimension, that it is bringing churches closer to one another, in this jagged succession of adoption and adaptation is, to me, evidence of the work of the Spirit. Each have the fruit of their action, and that there is an abundance of fruit that was 'not part of the plan' is the Spirit's gift to the churches in our time.

4. Places of encounter

Ecumenical endeavour is all too often the preserve of patriarchs and bishops, a few scholars, and a handful of parish clergy, but is there a way that 'ordinary' Christians can come to experience the reality of the *una sancta* while preserving the richness of their distinctive inheritances? We are often separated by language, customs, calendars, and for many churches *communio in sacris*—eating and drinking at one another's eucharistic celebrations is a step too far.[39] But links that grow from borrowing and sharing only grow through actual contact. One phenomenon valued by Orthodox and Catholics, and after several centuries of censure now being adopted by many Protestants, is that of pilgrimage. The journey to a particular place becomes for us, spatial and locomotive beings, a special place of encounter with the divine, a special moment in our lives as worshippers, and moment of transformation. Is there a possibility that in sharing pilgrim sites we could walk together, sing and pray together, encounter at our elbow that we are sisters and brothers in the Lord?

On visiting the maps section of a large Athens' bookshop I was amazed by the number of maps available of the Holy Mountain, yet to most Catholics the name 'Mount Athos' is unknown, and much less any of the other pilgrim sites in Greece. Speaking to a group of Anglicans recently, having mentioned the impact of Lourdes (a Marian pilgrimage site in the French Pyrenees) on the liturgical renewal within

[39] See Thomas O'Loughlin, *Eating Together, Becoming One: Taking Up Pope Francis's Call to Theologians* (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 2019).

Catholicism, I was asked 'what is Lourdes?' Yet there is hardly a Catholic church building in western Europe which will not have on its notice boards prominent posters about a pilgrimage to Lourdes at least once in the year, and one of the most common statues of the Theotokos found within or around Catholic buildings is of 'Our Lady of Lourdes.' By contrast, the *Camino* to the shrine of St James at Compostella in Galicia (north-west Spain), which only a generation ago hardly attracted any pilgrims, is now as busy as a city thoroughfare. They are not in any way traditional pilgrims seeking the pilgrim's indulgence nor favours at the shrine, indeed many boast that they are not Catholic nor Christian, and many would claim that they are not 'religious'—their collection of the stamps on their pilgrim passport is a proof to themselves and their associates of their endurance rather than, as in former times, a claim on the divine mercy. But few, whatever their explicit faith, would not agree that this journey is, somehow, an important moment in their own life journey. Another contrast is the tiny island of Iona off the west coast of Scotland once, in the seventh and eighth centuries, the setting of a great monastery, and now a place of pilgrimage within the Church of Scotland. Imagine how many learned divines from a period of four and half centuries must be shuddering in their graves at the thought of a Calvinist church promoting pilgrimage to a monastic site; but for many of those who arrive there the act of pilgrimage is a transformative event giving them a new vision of their inheritance and faith.

These few instances should put before us the continuing reality of pilgrimage as speaking to something deep within us even in a post-Christian or post-religious world. Equally, pilgrimage can be a unifying experience as the travellers lose their normal identities and share the common, if transitory, identity of pilgrim—and returning home bring something of the shared experience of *communitas* with them. Some sites of pilgrimage will always remain firmly in the possession of just one church or culture—the Holy Mountain might be one such place and, certainly, some of the Marian sites in Italy will appeal only to very specific cultural groups of Catholics—but perhaps there are other places where we can mingle on a common journey of faith, pray together, and experiencing the breath and variety of the *una sancta* return with a new ecumenical consciousness.

5. Sharing a language of sharing

The terminology of the higher echelons of ministry, in whatever church, often has a common element: it is designed to inculcate a sense of individual self-sufficiency. We have 'monarchical bishops' who know where they stand within the hierarchical ladder are also aware that they are, severally, each self-sufficient and, as an individual, standing on top of little triangle of authority and power within the larger triangle of apostolic succession. The terms 'primate', 'pope', and 'patriarch' suppose a distinctive group, whole in itself, such that if all other Christians ceased to exist,

here with this head would be a church, indeed 'the church', the *una sancta* as a matter of arithmetic fact rather than as a completeness. The use in discourse of terms like 'autocephaly' or 'subsistence' likewise presume that churches can exist without one another and that contacts between them might be likened to great ships who merely happen to meet upon the ocean. Notions of grand patriarchates may have a tight wrapping of apostolic language surrounding them, but in a world aware of the ramifications of colonialism, and the colonial vision of those who perceive themselves at a 'centre' as they look out to a 'periphery', such terminology seems simply grandiose. We have only to look at earlier debates on ecumenism, in every part of the Church, to know that these can become imperial endeavours (whether or not they are related to political entities with similar ambitions).

But what other language have we? We do not yet have a language that sees every worshipping community of the baptized as a real and primordial church: all 'churches' only exist in so far as there are actual communities of Christians who, in union with the Christ and empowered by the Spirit, offer acknowledgement and praise to the Father. Perhaps we need keep the word 'church' for such actual communities—returning to its original usage among the followers of Jesus—and devise new words for particular networks of the churches. How, for example, can we have a language that expresses the groupings of actual churches in terms of their mutual interdependence—for they are interdependent. What language of leadership could we find that stresses our need for mutual exchange and support—and acknowledges that without that sharing each actual church is but a lonely gathering rather than an active member of the *una sancta* to which it contributes its gifts and from which it receives gifts.

There is no new language for ecclesial relationships that we can just take 'off the shelf': it is an area where many churches will have to gently but deliberately change their ways. But there is, at least, a clear first step we can take: remove the language of uniqueness and splendid isolation that many of us, and Catholics more than any other, have inherited.

A 'cup of sugar' ecumenism

It has often been remarked that the phenomenon found in poor neighbourhoods in the British Isles of the women borrowing and re-borrowing cups of sugar was a far more profound practice in terms of social cohesion than simply answering the practical urgency of a moment of need: it created a common sense of belonging, fostered the need for good relations, and was located within the tangible reality of the world of 'things' which impinge on us so much more than good intentions. This forms the bedrock for my vision of ecumenism where we move forward as disciples together rather than waiting for the (possibly imaginary) day when church leaders

agree, theologians resolve the difficulties of centuries, and all wait for a general acceptance of the notion of ecumenism.

We all have a tendency to look back to the origins of Christianity and admire the unity (despite all the problems) we see there. But we should also recall that this was based not in some great vision, much less in a common theology, but based in solid things. People, letters, money, and books moved around. The sea was a great connector, they made use of the roads, and benefited from the peace of the empire, and so they could lean upon each other and learn from each other. Given that today we revel in an unparalleled connectivity, we might relearn this 'cup of sugar' approach to unity for which the Christ prayed (Jn 17:21).