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Interpreting our Faith

The ecumenical journey and its consequences

Pablo R. Andiónach

**Instituto Universitario ISEDET
Buenos Aires, Argentina**

The document 'A Treasure in Earthen Vessels: An Instrument for an Ecumenical Reflection on Hermeneutics' was greeted with praise and criticism. It had been worked on during the '90s at the request of the Fifth World Conference on Faith and Order (Santiago de Compostela, 1993) and sought to examine the ways used by different ecclesial traditions to interpret the Gospel. The most telling criticism can be summarized as follows: the document ends at the very point from which it becomes imperative to continue, i.e. when it expresses the hope that the question will be faced as to who has authority to discern and impose a particular interpretation. My suspicion is that the person making that comment had not been aware of the immense, perhaps impossible, task being called for: that of believing that it is possible to arrive at a consensus in a few years and untangle centuries-old knots through simple agreement by some thirty men and women who would be prepared to examine their traditions and propose new forms of interpretation that could unite us and smooth out our differences. Even so, it remains an essential task to be undertaken, not a burdensome task, but a fascinating enterprise.

At both extremes we could end up empty-handed. Those who expect miracles of progress in a short time will feel that no progress is being made and that there are insufficient criteria (i.e. willingness, interest or intellectual ability) and will be able to target their criticisms in the sure knowledge of being able to point out the weakness of the process. Those who believe that the task was based on a fallacy and simply a waste of time will base their arguments on the secure knowledge of being able to provide some good examples of hermeneutical intransigence (i.e. dogmatic, historical or political stubbornness) or of hermeneutic superficiality (i.e. selling out to culture, subjectivity or reductionism). None the less, the possibility of making some advance, however small, involves accepting that both have some truth in their criticisms and that we can learn from them: they are demanding speed and rigour, and those are important elements in any process. It has been said that we must learn to plan for the medium term, because in the long term we shall all be dead! It has also been rightly pointed out that what is essential, what is really essential, is deep-seated and invisible to the eye. Again, both statements are true and they should guide us in our work.

Faith and Order has approached this difficult task in recent years. Some innovative productive steps have been taken and been described in two documents, the so-called Strasbourg Report of June 2002 and the Vienna Report of April 2004. I shall introduce them briefly and then draw some conclusions from them for the life and witness of the churches.

I. Interpreting the Scriptures

The Strasbourg Consultation brought together thirty participants and some twelve presentations were made examining the same biblical text from the presenters' respective ecclesial traditions and social contexts. From the very beginning it was clear that the distinction between ecclesial tradition and social context was not as sharp as might have

been supposed from a purely academic standpoint. It was clear that doctrine and context were intertwined, enriching each other in some cases and in others in conflict with each other. This combination gave rise to ways of interpreting that did justice to particular faith communities, others reflecting doctrinal emphases, and yet others revealing missionary outreach.

I shall highlight four points from this report of the first consultation...

A. The locus of interpretation

Very different contexts in which the Scriptures are read were described, which in combination enabled us to some extent to arrive at an interpretation of Scripture considered correct:

- The liturgy as a locus for interpretation
- The general framework of the wider life of the Church
- The canon of Scripture
- Taking into account the particular doctrines of each tradition
- Maintaining the teachings of the Ecumenical Councils
- Responding to the social context and its challenges.

This incomplete list can be confusing. However strange it may seem, since our almost natural fear of what is different could lead us to see it as a threat, the consultation came to the conclusion that 'there is a growing sense that the heritage of scriptural interpretation throughout our ecclesial traditions and through the centuries is now a shared heritage and provides a common wide framework in which the Scriptures are read.' In other words, diversity is not the enemy of unity, but provides us with a starting point from which we can begin to seek common perspectives. After all, if diversity is a hallmark of the created world, why should we not be glad to find that we are reproducing that gracious gift in our interpretations?

B. Criteria for interpretation

The consultation examined the criteria used to establish whether an interpretation is correct. A criterion was taken to mean a standard by which to judge whether an interpretation is fruitful or not. A list was drawn up of positive indicators and it was found that the following criteria lead to the recognition of a particular interpretation as valid:

- The interpretation should be judged in relation to the Gospel (to Christ)
- The interpretation should be consistent with the rest of Scripture
- The interpretation should meet the needs of believers and take into account the context of those to whom it is addressed
- An interpretation should bear in mind the rest of the Christian community, both past and present.
- In interpreting Scripture an eschatological dimension is to be acknowledged, demonstrating that it is the Holy Spirit who renews our past interpretations and teaches us new ways of understanding their message.

There was adequate time for us to check that in all the presentations modern methods of exegesis had been used. Attempts were made to locate the text in its original context and build up a picture of the author(s) of the passage. There was agreement that an attempt at literary analysis of Scripture should be made and also a reverent but probing 'suspicious' reading of the text (a 'hermeneutics of suspicion'), examining the text from the reverse standpoint, which shows up what is left unsaid and the voices of those suppressed by the redactors of Scripture, including questioning the narrators' points of view.

Faithful to such a suspicious approach, the consultation arrived at an understanding that in the course of the centuries the Scriptures have often been interpreted by Christians in such a way that they served to support violence and the oppression of peoples and cultures. We thus managed to establish a negative criterion:

- An interpretation of Scripture can never be authentic if it results in degrading the life of humans, in damaging their culture or in infringing their rights.

- C. Finally, the consultation participants were guided by an inner conviction that the Spirit is at work opening up the Scriptures to us when we approach them humbly and prayerfully.

The diversity of contexts

The Consultation established that at least two coordinates almost constantly and in varying ways intersected. On the one hand, there were the different confessional identities made up of doctrines, theological emphases, liturgies, ways of approaching the world and its problems, and historical affinity. On the other hand, there was the powerful influence of the social context in which a particular church proclaims the Gospel. That context is a constituent element in hermeneutics and comes to play an important role in identifying a particular interpretation. Thus, a church that originally developed in the culture of the continent of Europe, after some decades of settlement in another continent, ends up with personal practices, worship styles and even interpretations of Scripture that are different and even surprising to the church of its origin. Although that does not seem to affect doctrines in the strict sense, it does raise questions concerning the degree to which our present hermeneutics – in some cases taken to be unalterable – does contain in itself a high level of unacknowledged cultural influence.

D. Ecumenical hermeneutics

The document took some cautious steps along the way towards an interpretation of Scripture that takes into account the spirit of ecumenism. Those steps are, however, highly significant and indicative of considerable progress. The importance of producing ecumenical translations of the Bible was highlighted, translations that would serve the different ecclesial communities so that the vernacular text would unite instead of divide us. It was also important to recognize that there is still much light and truth in God's Word that none of us can discover in isolation. It was pointed out that the different emphases evident in our different traditions serve to open up paths and not close them. Thus, the combination of critical-historical, contextual, patristic, post-colonial and other methods enables each tradition to verify its interpretation, receive healthy criticism from brothers and sisters, and, at the same time, contribute its own particular understanding to the universal Christian community.

Out of the analysis of the texts there arose doctrinal, liturgical and devotional questions, which needed to be investigated so that we could make progress in agreements and examine in greater depth what is of greatest interest to us. We had begun with the Scriptures, and we were now dealing with the whole edifice of the Church! The ground had been prepared for the second consultation.

II. Interpreting symbols, rites and practices

The Vienna Consultation brought together thirty participants from various traditions. While some had been present at the previous consultation, others were now involved for the first time. The key element of this consultation was presentations in pairs, each one of the pair from the same ecclesial tradition, but from a different context, and they were to expound their way of interpreting symbols, rites and practices out of their local ecclesial experience. Examination of these presentations produced valuable insights helping us further to clarify agreements and outstanding differences between different approaches to hermeneutics.

A. What is a symbol, rite or practice?

It was obvious from the beginning that different traditions give different meanings to these words. It was thus necessary to produce some agreed definitions enabling us to work and make progress on agreements. As a starting point, we stated that a symbol is a sign pointing beyond itself to God's saving presence. The bread and wine of communion, the Scriptures, the water of baptism, the cross and other Christian symbols are all symbols in that sense. Also, certain devotional practices, liturgical rituals and some texts have acquired symbolic value: the creeds, prayers and the liturgical year are some examples. We noted that some symbols are rooted in the deepest human experiences and require no further explanation.

Others, by contrast, initially require some introduction in order to be understood, although in the course of time they become accepted and require no explanation within the community using them.

A rite was understood to be an institutional liturgical action that a particular church sees as having a special character and importance. Such rites are baptism, communion and prayer. The third element is practices and they were defined as highly valued corporate or personal acts expressing the same Christian faith in different forms. They can be described as a continuation of the liturgy outside the church, in mission or in witnessing beyond the ecclesial community.

Such definitions are certainly inadequate. At least four nuances were identified in the consultation as we progressed in our understanding of these words:

- In some cases, symbols, rites and practices were understood as signs, which, by alluding to a reality distinct from them, evoked what was signified. In such cases, what is evoked is not present except in the form of the symbol alluding to them.
- Another way of understanding symbols is that they embody two different realities and that both are really present in the symbol. Thus the symbol comes to possess characteristics of what is evoked and is worthy to be treated as such.
- A third approach is one that confers symbolic value from the perspective of faith on particular communal or social actions. This has prominence in churches not greatly given to the traditional symbols of Christianity, but which regard public witness for justice and for worthy causes as a symbolic act.
- A fourth approach comes from churches whose theological structure favours the so-called base communities. Here valuable symbols emerge in day-to-day practice and are highly variable. Poetic language and music here usually occupy the place taken by ecclesial symbols in other traditions.

B. Symbols as building blocks of identity

Just as certain childhood memories mark the life of all adults, so symbols, rites and practices do so in a similar way. Members of a church experience symbols as part of their ecclesial identity, but also as part of their personal identity. That is why we find it so difficult ourselves to criticize symbols, rites and practices, and also to explain them to those who do not share the same concepts. It was interesting to note that there was agreement that baptism and communion are rites that confer on churches a very strong identity. They can be considered as almost universal signs of the Christian faith. However, different understandings of their meaning and nature persist, and also the meaning of the actual words used in their administration.

The document likens the development of symbols, rites and practices to the structure of grammar. The understanding is that there are certain rules to be applied which must be kept and which contribute to the structure of the symbol. This grammar validates and gives identity to the symbol or practice in question. Not all bread is the bread of communion, not all water is the water of baptism, and not all images are icons. These become ritual symbols by the performance of particular procedures. Up to that point in the consultation, we were able to say that there was general consensus. But those considerations raised questions of authority:

- Who has the authority to decide what should be regarded as sacred?
- Who decides who may and who may not administer these sacred rites?
- Who has the authority to permit a particular person to participate in or conduct a rite, or to exclude them from it?

While it was clear that each individual church has internal mechanisms to deal with these questions, we must also recognize that these are very varied and sometimes contradictory. The very rites that we acknowledge to unite us across culture, language and traditions, divide us when we interpret them or determine the authority to administer them. This will certainly require more discussion and prayer on all sides.

Almost repeating the experience of the Strasbourg Consultation, we also discovered here that the cultural and social context in which a church is called to witness affects to a large degree

its understanding, creation and practice of the symbols, rites and practices that confer identity. There are many intersecting currents producing on the one hand a rich range of possibilities, and on the other raising the question of how far we can go. On the one hand, we have currents that have to do with politics, ethnicity, race, gender, culture, etc. On the other hand, these currents intersect with ecclesial and doctrinal emphases that differ from church to church, and indeed within each church. We are consequently presented with an immense variety of forms of worship, witness and service. The creation of a church's ecclesial identity has to do with all that and we discovered that, just as it is not possible to isolate ecclesial practice from its context, it also does not seem easy to prevent this intersection of currents from exerting considerable influence when a particular church is creating its identity. The tension between elements to be kept and those that should be adapted to the culture in which a church is set is and will for the moment remain an open question difficult to resolve.

C. Called to unity

The consultation wondered how it was possible to recognize the same Christian faith when it is expressed in different symbols, rites and practices, or in the same ones but with different interpretations of their nature and meaning. How can this be done when there are even churches that are almost lacking in them and regard their participation in actions for justice and peace as a symbol of their faith?

There was agreement on some criteria to discern the value of a symbol, rite or practice:

- It should be based on the divine initiative made actual in Christ.
- It should be witnessed to in Scripture.
- It should stand in the apostolic tradition.

It was evident to the consultation that, while we have and observe different symbols and rites, the aim of every Christian church is the same: salvation and showing forth the kingdom of God. The inherent power in acts such as baptism, the Lord's Supper and the footwashing, which express the strong unity of the people of God and which outwardly identify us as part of the one and same faith community, does not prevent them from dividing and separating us by reason of their interpretation.

Is it possible for us to develop new symbolic forms capable of expressing the desire for unity in the various Christian churches? None the less, however legitimate that question may be, it must not be seen as abandoning the attempt to find common ground that would enable us to unite through those symbols, rites and practices that are so much loved in Christian tradition and by means of which we are identified by the society in which we are set.

III. In Conclusion

Having examined and commented on these excellent documents, let me make some closing remarks. It would be a valuable exercise to reflect on what we are seeking when we speak of an ecumenical hermeneutics. I have sensed that at times the thought is to find a method or agree on an authority that could legitimize an interpretation or authorize a rite or symbol; and that that authority, recognized by all present, would be acknowledged throughout Christendom and that consequently there would be no more splits or divisions. I do not believe, nor do I consider it useful, that we should seek such a model of interpretation or authority. That would be a very shaky contribution to the ecumenical movement and an offence to the workings of the Holy Spirit, who blows where he wills to surprise and renew us. That, rather than an ecumenical hermeneutics, would be a uniform interpretation, killing all future discussion and impoverishing our message.

An ecumenical hermeneutics should lead us to appreciate the experience and practice of others. It is a fallacy that anyone can be self-sufficient and dispense with contributions from others when defining their faith and its interpretation. Every step towards an inclusive hermeneutics with regards to other traditions and methods will place us in a better position than the one from which we set out.

I believe that in the ecumenical journey towards a shared hermeneutics we should aspire, first to understand, then to respect, then to appreciate and finally to love the interpretations, rites, symbols and practices that are dear to our Christian brothers' and sisters' hearts. We should aspire to be open-minded to what is different for us and to what the Spirit has given prominence to through that other part of his people, which at times seems strange and at others incomprehensible. We should also hope that our own interpretation will be appreciated and listened to by others.

These thoughts are offered as a further contribution on the way.