

## Fostering Spiritual Ecumenism

This is an edited transcription of the workshop held in Rome on 1 June 2017 with this topic as part of the celebrations for the 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the Catholic Charismatic Renewal #ccrgoldenjubilee2017

The speakers were Charles Whitehead and Bishop Sean Larkin, with translations in English and Spanish.

Charles Whitehead is from England, and a former ICCRS president. He has also written books about the renewal and the Holy Spirit. <http://www.ccr.org.au/index.php/item/26-interview-with-charles-whitehead>  
<http://www.iccrs.org/en/charles-whitehead-speaks-to-the-holy-father/>

Bishop Sean Larkin is an Anglican bishop and part of the Anglican Expression of the Community of Jesus. <https://www.kairos2017.com/speakers/speaker-profile-sean-larkin/> <http://www.anglicanexpression.com/our-journey.html>

This is the link for the video recording: <https://youtu.be/IVhxnAeOZCU>

**Charles Whitehead:** I bring you greetings from England. There are many people here in Rome for this anniversary from England. My wife is sitting over there, she is a very committed Anglican, and we have survived marriage for 50 years. So ecumenical relationships are possible; and not just on special occasions – but all the time.

I want to begin with scripture: Ephesians 4:1-6.

*As a prisoner for the Lord, then, I urge you to live a life worthy of the calling you have received. Be completely humble and gentle. Be patient, bearing with one another in love. Make every effort to keep the unity of the Spirit through the bond of peace. There is one Body, and one Spirit, just as you were called to one hope when you were called. There is one faith, one baptism, one God and Father of all who is over all and through all and in all.*

We all know that divisions in the Body of Christ restrict our effectiveness in building the kingdom and our divisions undermine our witness to the world. So the Catholic Church looks upon ecumenism as essential to her life today. And this means that spiritual ecumenism should be essential to you and to me.

Now what does this mean in practice? Spiritual ecumenism is a phrase taken from the Second Vatican Council. And at its most simple it means to build good relationships with members of other churches and Christian communities; to get to know one another; to accept and to love one another; to pray together and to do together as much as we can.

Now if this is going to happen, we all have an important part to play especially those of us involved in the Charismatic Renewal, because as Pope Francis has reminded us – the Renewal is by its very nature ecumenical. So we must joyfully celebrate that grace and we must release the fire of the Holy Spirit so that individuals and organisations can be transformed and equipped to face the challenges of the future.

At the Second Vatican Council in 1964 Pope St John XXIII said he was determined to put Christian unity firmly on the map. And so the very first sentence of the Council's document on Christian unity, the document is called [Unitatis Redintegratio](#) and it begins with the words, 'The restoration of unity among Christians is one of the principal concerns of the Second Vatican Council' and section 3 says, 'All who have been justified by faith in baptism are members of Christ's Body and have a right to be called Christian and so are correctly accepted as brothers and sisters by the children of the Catholic Church'. So your protestant or pentecostal friend or who lives next door to you, is your brother or sister in Christ. This is a fact declared by the Church.

For the first time the Council formally recognised authentic faith in Christ and the presence of the Holy Spirit in other churches, and accepted that divisions in the church contradict the will of Christ and scandalize the world. So the Council voted overwhelmingly for positive relationships with other Christians.

When writing his apostolic letter [Et Unum Sint](#) Pope St John Paul II clearly stated that in doing this he said, 'I am obeying the Lord' and Pope Benedict reminded us, that for Catholics ecumenism is absolutely central to Christian life. And in his encyclical [Evangelii Gaudium](#) Pope Francis has moved ecumenism forward very dramatically, particularly in sections 244-246\*, which include these words: 'If we really believe in the abundantly free working of the Holy Spirit, we can learn so much from one another, not just to be better informed about them but rather to reap what the Spirit has sown in them which is also supposed to be a gift for us.'

You and I always have a choice how we want to behave in our own particular situation. To do nothing is not acceptable. In order to heal the pain of division, we must not only accept that there is division, we need to feel the pain ourselves - because only then will we begin to move forward, and to build good relationships with our Christian brothers and sisters. Spiritual ecumenism calls us to be pro-active. We must build personal relationships.

Now I know you all read the Catholic Catechism frequently. So you will already know what section 821 tells you. But let me just remind you. It tells us that we need the Holy Spirit to be at work in us bringing about conversion of heart. But we then need to pray together with our Christian brothers and sisters. This is the heart of spiritual ecumenism, and this will lead us to a desire to get to know one another better, which in turn will involve dialogue and regular meeting. And this will lead us to collaboration in our human service. Now for most of us this will all begin with the local Christian churches where we live.

A personal story: 25 years ago the local churches where we live accepted the idea of doing a mission together. And because nobody wanted to take responsibility for this (they thought it would be full of problems), I was asked to do it.

Now our local churches are 3 Anglican churches, and they were very different, one was very high church – almost Catholic, one was very evangelical charismatic and the third was extremely liberal. Then we had a very dynamic charismatic Baptist church. We had Methodists who were very quiet and well behaved, we had a reformed church and two Catholic churches that were part of the same parish. So I called all the leaders of these churches together. We were going to pray and share a little bit about ourselves.

After 10 minutes I knew the mission was an impossibility without a miracle. They did not know each other. They did not like each other. This church blamed the other church for stealing people. And the other church said the people gave themselves up because the life of this church was so poor. How could we do a mission together?

We met for a full morning every month for 18 months. We prayed together, we shared together, we learned to understand one another and eventually we loved one another. And then we said, 'We can do the mission'. We then had one year working with our respective churches to bring them into this relationship with each other.

We live in 2 villages. 1000 people came to the mission every day for 2 weeks. Every church had new members at the end of the 2 weeks. And since then, 25 years ago, we have worked together all the time. The leaders meet at our home on the first Monday of every month. We pray together, we pray for each other, and we talk about the future.

We now have a prayer room in our village where we have 24/7 prayer, 24 hours a day, 7 days a week, which all the churches support. I have to tell you they are praying for you right now. I ask them, 'Will you pray for

me?' 'Yes, we will pray for you, yes, but we will pray more for them.' 'Why more for them?' 'Because they have to listen to you.' But this is the fruit of building relationships.

At the end of the mission 25 years ago the local media, every headline said the same thing, 'Their unity held'. This was a miracle, for the local people.

The Renewal is by its very nature ecumenical. We in the charismatic renewal rejoice in what the Spirit is doing throughout the Church world-wide today.

We know the experience of Psalm 133. *'How good and pleasant it is when brothers live together in unity, because there the Lord pours His blessing.'* This is a reality. When we work with protestants and pentecostals and independent churches the Lord blesses what we do. We are pilgrims journeying together. We must learn to trust each other. Loving relationships are the key to unity. This is our experience.

In 3 weeks' time I will be spending a 2 day retreat with the leaders of our other local churches. We will worship the Lord together. We will pray together. We will pray for each other. We will share our most deep needs. We will listen to the Holy Spirit, and I know, and I know for sure when we leave the retreat centre after those 2 days, our relationships will be even stronger. And the Lord will have shown us what He wants us to do next because we recognise one another as brothers and sisters in Christ.

We share the same Holy Spirit. Each of us is faithful to our own church but we are open to the gifts of the other churches. We all carry some responsibility for the divisions. We must recognise that and repent. Then we must do together whatever we can possibly do.

This is challenging. It's not easy. We have been doing it locally where I live for 25 years, and there are still times when we struggle. But we never forget Jesus and His Father want unity among us, and it's a work of the Holy Spirit.

So as St Paul says in 1 Cor 1:10 *'I appeal to you brothers, for the sake of our Lord Jesus Christ to make up the differences between you, and instead of disagreeing among yourselves to be united in your belief and practice.'*

You and I cannot solve all the theological issues. The theologians are working on that. But as Pope Francis has said very clearly, 'Don't wait for the theologians to come to an agreement'. If you remember what he said, he said that the Lord will have returned before that happens. It's a challenge. But we, you and me, wherever we are, we can build these relationships with our protestant and pentecostal and independent brothers and sisters, and the Holy Spirit will show us what we can do together.

This is spiritual ecumenism. Every single one of us is called to this. Amen? Amen! Alleluia? Alleluia!

**Bishop Sean Larkin:** We are very surprised to be here. The reason we are surprised is this. But I am reminded of the last words that we heard Cardinal Bergoglio speak in Buenos Aires in 2012. We were together with him at Luna Park and he was speaking last and this was, let's say, about 5000 Roman Catholic spirit filled believers (they were the scary ones) and then there were the Pentecostals and us. And Cardinal Bergoglio said to us charismatics, 'Have we lost the ability to be surprised by the Spirit? Have we? A little. So we are here to be surprised by the Spirit because we do want to celebrate 50 years of Catholic charismatic renewal, but we haven't begun, because if this is it, Oh dear!

So let's look at how the Spirit of God might engage us. Oh, by the way, do you want to meet Jesus? (Yes). I sometimes do. But if He is Lord, He can do as He pleases and when He pleases through whoever He pleases. One of the things that has most hindered the grace of the Holy Spirit in the Renewal is that we took control.

We took control back. This is my experience talking over 40 years to many people in renewal. We want the Holy Spirit to be respectable, and He says, 'No! I will be God.'

Do we want the Holy Spirit? (Yes). Now, some of you probably think that the Christian life is difficult. It's not difficult exactly. It's impossible. In other words we need God to make the life happen. And that is impossible without Him. Which means that the only reason we are here is to please Him. We have only one person to please and His name is Jesus.

I was baptised in the Spirit in 1976. And part of my testimony is this: Oh, yes, I understood the gifts of the Spirit. But the morning after I was baptised in the Spirit I woke up changed. The Spirit of God took me into the word of God, and without the word of God we will go astray. Because it is as precious a gift to us as the Holy Mass itself. The Word and the Spirit and the Mass live together. True. The Word, Spirit and the Mass live together.

Would you turn with me to the word of God? Would you turn with me to a very familiar charismatic passage, and we are in 1 Cor 12:12. Now as you are turning there the Corinthian church was horrible. It was a mess. The doctrine was terrible. Ethics? Eew. Leadership? What leadership? And the jealousy and competition with the gifts of the Spirit, 'I am more spiritual than you.' And Paul says this, he says, if you have that attitude as God renews the Church you will discover a great lack of love.

But this church that was a mess, and I am speaking now as a bishop in the western church, I've had the joy of travelling to many places but I'm just going to speak to the western church. Brothers and sisters in Christ, we are in deep trouble. We need the Lord. Not for a better church, but for a church that truly reflects Jesus.

So when we read through 1 Corinthians we see much sin, but there is a sin that I think outweighs every other sin in the Corinthian church. *'For just as the Body is one and has many members and all the many members of the Body are one Body, so it is with Christ. For by the one Spirit we were all baptised in one Body.'*

Now what the Corinthian church was doing to sin was this: We were looking at each other, we were talking to each other, but in our hearts was something deeply sinful. It was an attitude of sin. It said, my brother, my sister, I do not need you. And God hates it. God hates that sin. But it is all over the western church.

So if we are going to experience renewal, that as we come to faith in Jesus Christ repentance takes place. So one of the graces we need from the Holy Spirit is the good gift of repentance. And I'm talking about this grace for Christians, not for non-Christians. And this grace, this gift, that God gives to us is ongoing and every day.

And in the book of Romans Paul will say, Romans 2, God's goodness and His kindness walks us into it, it leads us in to repentance. And repentance in the New Testament is the Lord wants to touch our minds, He wants to get inside our thinking. And I'm getting older. I'm old. I've just become a grandfather for the first time. I don't want to change. But with the Holy Spirit, His gifts are new.

We are not here in these days to think about a museum. We are here in these days to thank God that He did choose to move by His Spirit in Duquesne. And we celebrate 50 years. Very short in God's timing. So for the pathway of the Spirit, the Spirit will take us into repentance.

Charles has explained to us why the teaching of the Church is this. You cannot be a Roman Catholic, I'm going to say that again, you cannot be a practicing Roman Catholic and say 'I don't care about ecumenism'. And when I meet a Roman Catholic, I want to meet a Roman Catholic, not a pretend Catholic, not a Catholic that says I like this but I don't like that. We have a word for that: protestant.

You see one of the places God has taken us is to work with certain new communities - in fact we are part of a new community which is Roman Catholic, with a few Anglicans. But one of those communities is the Alleluia Community in Georgia. But if you hear the leaders of that community speak they will always say this: now the majority of people are Roman Catholic, but the current lead co-ordinator is not a Catholic. And when they speak they say this: My responsibility as a non-Roman Catholic is to make you the best Catholics you can be. In that process I will be changed, because when you live life together you can't do anything else but be changed.

But so much in ecumenism is done through ignorance. Ignorance is the devil's playground. And the Spirit of God is the Spirit of truth. When we read Pope Benedict, Pope Benedict is always saying to us relentlessly, 'Go for it, pursue truth'. But that's hard work. That means I have to learn. I have to take the place of a disciple. And I have to change. Yes, we do.

So let's come back to 1 Corinthians, 'I don't need you' is the sin. Now when you became a Christian, or perhaps you had the joy of being raised in the household of faith. What a joy! But God doesn't always ask your permission. And so when He took you to Himself, He plunged you into His Church. That's not something He asked you about. He's done it. So it is impossible to be a Christian in isolation. People will say to me, I'm a Christian but I don't have to go to church. (Raspberry/fart sound) That's my response. Because if Jesus loves His church and I don't want anything to do with Jesus loving His church, then something is very wrong.

So brothers and sisters, discipleship, learning, letting Him change us by His Spirit, this is not an optional extra.

I'm going to share an Orthodox experience – from the Orthodox church, because the Church is much bigger than we think. Many years ago I was in Romania and I was sent by our prison service because I had spent 10 years as a prison chaplain. And after the Ceausescu's were killed in Romania they were allowed to put priests into prison. The priests went into prison, but the Orthodox priests knew how to be priests but they didn't know how to be priests in prison. So I was sent to Cluj to speak at a Synod, and then visit literally most prisons in Romania.

But I don't want to visit Romania and come back unchanged. I want to be changed. I don't want to walk out of here at the end of the day and not be different. And so as I was going around the prisons I began to discuss with them the liturgy. And in the Orthodox liturgy there is more bible than anywhere else on the face of the earth. But one of the priests was very kind to me and he said, 'Father, sit by the end of the holy table and we will teach you'. And so we go through this long, long, long liturgy, everything repeated three times, and then the priest takes communion. Do you know how many receive communion? Zero. Jesus is present, and nobody receives.

And I still to this day cannot tell you which came first. But I wept and I wept and I wept. And I was full of anger. And I said to the priest, why did nobody come? And he explained to me that they hadn't had opportunity to go to confession. And I said, 'Why not?' Not enough priests. And then he said with this, 'And most of the people they don't understand the Orthodox.'

And I had a little picture in my mind. And I saw a big old fashioned treasure chest, buried in the mud, full of precious gifts but stuck, and then I saw the chest begin to open. You see the gifts were all there, but they were all stuck. And I heard in my mind's eye, I heard from God. 'Sean, if you will learn to become like them, then I will open the doors for you.'

I went back and told Jill and she said, 'You have lost your mind'. But I began to explore the traditions of the church in priesthood. I opened up the traditions of the church, and I discovered as I embraced what has

always been, that God began to open up something that had always been – this is how I now interpret it. That God had to take a lot of ignorance out of my life because I have been taught many things that were not true. And I still continue to have to be changed and to learn.

Now in some ways I want to share that picture with you, because in some ways that is how I feel about the Catholic Church. You are rich in scripture, you are rich in tradition, but does it live? Does it live? Is it alive? You are full of gift.

There was a famous preacher in London called Dr Martin Lloyd Jones, and one person asked him, 'Doctor, do you believe in the baptism of the Holy Spirit?' And he responded like this. He said some of you keep telling me that I've got everything and Martin Lloyd Jones responded like this. 'Got it all? You've got it all? You've got it all? Then in the name of heaven, where is it?'

Because God has given gifts to His church. He has given gifts to you, and part of those gifts are each other. So that each of us can be made more like Jesus.

Ecumenism is essential for two other reasons. Firstly, again to the western world, our Gospel of Jesus Christ is under attack in the church. We need one another for evangelization into the world and we need one another for the new evangelization which takes us into the world but more equipped. So we need one another.

The second reason is this: and it is the only quote I will give from Pope Francis, 'the ecumenism of blood'. When our Coptic brothers and sisters are martyred, they don't care when they are killing the martyrs whether it is Coptic blood, Catholic blood or protestant blood: it's blood.

Brothers and sisters, without each other we will prevent God from doing what He wants to do. And that will be very serious on the day of judgment. God might say to us, 'I wanted to do this, but you would not!'

Do we want to be more like Jesus? Sometimes.

Would you stand? I want to pray for us for just one minute. In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. On the first Easter Sunday evening Jesus came and stood among them. They were filled with fear and He said this: 'Peace I give you. My peace. Receive a fresh resurrection peace.' He is here to give you His deep, deep peace. And from peace, from that place of peace, which was my experience of being baptised in the Spirit, the Spirit will make you more like Jesus, which is what you want. And one day He will come back for one bride, His Church, and we will be given to the Father as Christ's precious gift. Peace be with you.

### **Question & Answer session**

Q. Hello, I come from Madrid, Spain. The majority of Spaniards are Catholics. In recent years I have met with evangelical brothers and sisters and other churches. Some years ago I would have fled whenever I met someone who was not Catholic. My pastors would maybe not have allowed me to get mixed up with these people. But since I received the baptism in the Holy Spirit and began to be involved in the Renewal I've started to love them, and to live by faith with them, and to learn a lot from them, and we are working together in different programs of evangelization. What can I do in the midst of this Catholic Madrid in Spain to not be considered as a madman or as a crazy person or as someone you must run away from because I am dangerous? Yes, that's my question. Thank you.

**Charles Whitehead:** It's a very good question. For many years I was in the same place. People thought that because I had a lot of contact with pentecostals and protestants that I was somehow dangerous and a bit crazy and wrong. We are the ones who are following the teaching of the Church. But a lot of our Catholic brothers and sisters will do something ecumenical once a year: the week of prayer for Christian unity. They become

very ecumenical for that week. They go to a service in another church, host a service in our church, pray together, and at the end of the week of prayer for Christian unity they heave a big sigh of relief. Now we don't have to do that again for another year. But that is totally contrary to the Catholic teaching today, and especially the teaching of Pope Francis. We must build these relationships, but they must be ongoing.

I'm a good Catholic, he says very modestly. I'm very faithful to the Church. Pope John Paul II made me a Knight of St Gregory for my service to the Church, and part of that is the ecumenical work. And Pope Francis and his 2 predecessors have personally encouraged me to do this work. So we are not the crazy ones.

We are not the ones who are wrong, but we have to understand a lot of people think we are crazy. We have to re-educate people and it's a long process since the Reformation, but amazing progress has been made there also – documents of agreement between Catholics and Lutherans. I think my priest brother here is actually in the right place.

Q. I come from Latin America, from Mexico, where proselytism makes it almost impossible to work in the area of ecumenism. There is no promotion in this area of bishops, priests. They don't work on it. But if you lay people in the Church of Mexico have relations with the other churches, even within the official Catholic charismatic renewal in Mexico they look at us as if we were not so good. Even in our prayer meetings they have forbidden the evangelical songs so as to promote the Catholic music, we have to reject these protestant songs. So like, so how can we approach our leaders? Is there any official way to do this? To avoid all this struggle and tension between protestants and Catholics, knowing that there is also this protestant proselytism? It is an issue. But it's true that we are starting to have these communities, protestant pastors, which are trying to mingle, to relate to the Catholic Church. But anyway my own leaders in the Renewal, they don't like it. How to approach my leaders?

**Bishop Sean Larkin:** In the kingdom of God, we need to ask God for something and there is an expression which says, 'Find the man of peace', and kind of, the two questions run together very slightly. And I have read the document for South America ([Aparecida Document](#)) that Cardinal Bergoglio shared so, but I think we have to ask, 'Lord, give us people we can trust who will not come into my situation and try and change everything' but are simply there to bless you, and who want to learn from you. In the South American document, many problems were identified. One of them was simply this, 'How do the shepherds care for the sheep?' And Pope Francis says to us pastors, we must smell like the sheep. So there is a big question in the Church in South America about pastoral work. The second question is this, bible teaching. Much movement is because people are hungry for the word of God. And so, and this is only my limited experience, this is not the fruit of the rejection of the Catholic Church, it's the fruit of people desiring something more. And some of the bishops are getting it wrong because they are afraid. And I don't have links with Mexican bishops, I do with bishops in Brazil and Argentina.

Does anybody here remember the ministry of Fr Rick Thomas? El Paso, Texas. Wonderful community. I was in El Paso and I spent a day with them going over to Juarez and we were visiting people who were shut in and couldn't come outside. They were just shut in their homes. We took them gifts of food, we took them the gifts of healings that we had, we took blessed water and salt, and nobody cared that I wasn't a Roman Catholic.

**Charles Whitehead:** When you have leaders in the charismatic renewal or in your parish who are against building these relationships with other churches, the only thing to do is to challenge them, the leaders, to get to know the leaders of these other churches.

In 2005, Sue and I went to Buenos Aires to see Cardinal Bergoglio. We took with us two pentecostal leaders and our question to Cardinal Bergoglio was very simple: 'How do we build better relationships with each other?' He told us, you have to cross the street, you have to ring the doorbell of the pentecostal leader who

lives over there, you have to introduce yourself, ask him to pray for you, join him for coffee, pray together, build a personal relationship with him. And when we travelled around Buenos Aires in the following days every pentecostal leader we met told us, 'We love Bergoglio, he is our friend, we have built a personal relationship.' And that's the only answer. 25 years ago my parish priest wasn't interested in the other churches, but when I introduced him to their leaders he got to know them. He liked them better than he likes me. Strong relationships. They have to build personal contact.

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\*Evangelii Gaudium : *Ecumenical dialogue*

244. Commitment to ecumenism responds to the prayer of the Lord Jesus that “they may all be one” (John 17:21). The credibility of the Christian message would be much greater if Christians could overcome their divisions and the Church could realize “the fullness of catholicity proper to her in those of her children who, though joined to her by baptism, are yet separated from full communion with her”. We must never forget that we are pilgrims journeying alongside one another. This means that we must have sincere trust in our fellow pilgrims, putting aside all suspicion or mistrust, and turn our gaze to what we are all seeking: the radiant peace of God’s face. Trusting others is an art and peace is an art. Jesus told us: “Blessed are the peacemakers” (Matt 5:9). In taking up this task, also among ourselves, we fulfil the ancient prophecy: “They shall beat their swords into ploughshares” (Isaiah 2:4).

245. In this perspective, ecumenism can be seen as a contribution to the unity of the human family. At the Synod, the presence of the Patriarch of Constantinople, His Holiness Bartholomaios I, and the Archbishop of Canterbury, His Grace Rowan Williams, was a true gift from God and a precious Christian witness.

246. Given the seriousness of the counter-witness of division among Christians, particularly in Asia and Africa, the search for paths to unity becomes all the more urgent. Missionaries on those continents often mention the criticisms, complaints and ridicule to which the scandal of divided Christians gives rise. If we concentrate on the convictions we share, and if we keep in mind the principle of the hierarchy of truths, we will be able to progress decidedly towards common expressions of proclamation, service and witness. The immense numbers of people who have not received the Gospel of Jesus Christ cannot leave us indifferent. Consequently, commitment to a unity which helps them to accept Jesus Christ can no longer be a matter of mere diplomacy or forced compliance, but rather an indispensable path to evangelization. Signs of division between Christians in countries ravaged by violence add further causes of conflict on the part of those who should instead be a leaven of peace. How many important things unite us! If we really believe in the abundantly free working of the Holy Spirit, we can learn so much from one another! It is not just about being better informed about others, but rather about reaping what the Spirit has sown in them, which is also meant to be a gift for us. To give but one example, in the dialogue with our Orthodox brothers and sisters, we Catholics have the opportunity to learn more about the meaning of episcopal collegiality and their experience of synodality. Through an exchange of gifts, the Spirit can lead us ever more fully into truth and goodness.