BOOK LAUNCH

A Celebration of Ut unum sint The 25th Anniversary,
edited by Doru Costache and Diane Speed (Sydney 2020)

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A book launch is always a significant occasion, not only because it honours the authors but also because it launches new insights and ideas to a wider readership. This book has the added significance, that it celebrates the twenty-fifth anniversary of the Ut unum sint, the encyclical of Pope John Paul II on Christian unity. Christian unity is the theme that holds these short essays together.

The book is a collection of thirty-three essays written by people who have a clear passion for the gospel of God and its flourishing. Each in its own way, explicitly or implicitly, originates in one biblical text or another that gives the foundations of Christian unity. Often, but not necessarily always, it is the text of John 17, “That they may all be one”, which also forms the opening words of the encyclical. The book is divided into two sections, the first of which presents reflections on Ut unum sint, and the second, reflections on ecumenism more generally. Taken together, they are a statement about the progress of the ecumenical movement from the early memories of the authors to today.

I use the word “movement” quite deliberately, because from the beginnings of modern ecumenism, early in the twentieth century, those engaged in ecumenical endeavours regarded themselves as a movement. This did not mean that there was no formal interest from the churches, but it gave people the freedom to venture into areas that might have been challenging to some of the church membership. For this reason, I believe it is accurate to say that the ecumenical movement has always operated at various levels, from the highly formal to the more informal. The concerns of the participants at these various levels have been somewhat different, even if all had the same goal. To put this in theological terms, we would say that the ecumenical movement was a work of the Spirit, who continues to surprise.
This is the very thing that is on display in this book. In many of the essays, we hear stories of people and communities. It was a pleasant surprise to me to realise that there are more stories of achievement and progress than stories of the pain of division – and that is a good thing. There are stories of ecumenical friendships that have developed, often in unexpected places. There are stories of people keeping the ecumenical flame alive in the face of potential disillusionment. Taken together, these stories represent an important witness in this part of the world to a certain ecumenical achievement as people discerned the Spirit and followed the Spirit’s path. Of course, this often challenges the institutional church, but I guess that is what a movement can do.

I don’t mean to suggest that these essays present some sort of stand-off between informal and formal expressions of church life or of ecumenism. On the contrary, the tone of this book is dialogical. The anniversary of the encyclical seems to have generated a new round of dialogue. Above all, this has been one of the achievements of the ecumenical movement: we can talk frankly to each other. We should never take this for granted, because it seems to be becoming rarer today for people with different understandings of the world and life to talk honestly and constructively with each other. Ecumenists, on the other hand, are good listeners. I would encourage you to approach these essays in that spirit. I think it is also the spirit that pervades the encyclical.

We might be celebrating twenty-five years since the publication of the encyclical, but it itself was published thirty years after the Second Vatican Council. For Roman Catholics, then, it can be read as an act of reception of the Council and its Decree on Ecumenism. Even in 1995 Catholics were still learning about reception, and it was also a topic in ecumenical circles, including the World Council of Churches. Reception is an ancient idea and was common in the history of the church – think of those councils in the fourth and fifth centuries when each would begin its work by receiving the work of the previous council. In this way, we see that church teaching is not static, but that it continues to develop as new situations call for a reception and often a re-reception of a particular formulation of doctrine. As an act of reception of the Second Vatican Council, *Ut unum sint* called for a renewed commitment to Christian unity and the unity of the church, and a more penetrating understanding of the command of Christ that “they may all be one”. Several factors contributed to this new context for reception, one of which was the experience of bilateral dialogues and their achievements. In fact, the pope engaged in a lengthy reflection on dialogue, and most notably called it an
“exchange of gifts” (#28). He emphasised the importance of listening to each other, and reminded the reader that dialogue in this spirit may truly become a dialogue of conversion. He wasn’t just talking about formal theological dialogues, but about dialogue as a way of Christian living and an aid to renewal. This idea resonates through the essays in this book as the various authors recognise either directly or indirectly, that the central message of the gospel is one of conversion and that Christian unity is really about making the church more true to its nature and mission. In other words, all the churches are called to continual reform and renewal.

We now mark twenty-five years since the promulgation of *Ut unum sint*, and are faced with our own receptive moment, aware that we are in a different position to that of 1995, and certainly different from 1964. In the years since 1995, the encyclical has been studied widely, even beyond the Roman Catholic Church. The ecumenical work that has gone on, both in formal and informal settings, may help us to arrive at a more penetrating interpretation of the vision of the encyclical. It is not unreasonable to speak of a reception of the encyclical beyond the Roman Catholic Church and in the *oikumene* more broadly.

As several of the essays note, the encyclical begins with a vision of God’s plan for the unity of the whole of creation and situates the unity of the church in this context. The unity of the church is not for its own sake, but for the glory of God; and God is glorified when the creation achieves its purpose as given by God. The church is a sign and instrument of that unity. While ever the church remains divided, the plan of God is less visible in the world. From this we see the urgency Pope John Paul II places on ecumenism. He says it cannot be considered as just some sort of appendix to normal church life, rather it should form an organic part of the church’s life and work (# 20). Twenty-five years on, it seems that this is an insight that needs to be re-received. Christian churches are struggling to give a credible witness to the Gospel of God. At the same time, as I mentioned earlier, the social divisions in our world seem to be getting wider. At a time when people and groups are building walls to keep out opinions they don’t like, the churches have an opportunity to show what God’s plan might look like when we take respectful dialogue seriously and seek to tear down walls of division.

In the years since the publication of the encyclical, the wider ecumenical movement has focused on ecclesiological issues. One need think only of the work of the World Council of
The big ecumenical question is still, “what will the unity of the church look like?” When you read these essays, keep that question in mind, because I think it runs through them as a live question. Some of the essays will present a vision of what the future church will look like once it is truly one; others are clear about what it should not look like, even if they are less clear about the actual concrete shape of a united church. Lurking around in all of this is the very real challenge about the institution and whether it is a help or a hindrance to unity.

For more than one hundred years in the ecumenical movement the churches have struggled to arrive at a common understanding of what unity will look like. In fact, different models of unity have been proposed at various times. At the Second Vatican Council, the Roman Catholic Church spoke of organic unity, but spelling out what that means has not always been easy. People still remember the Roman Catholic reticence to be part of the ecumenical movement right up until just after the Council. The ecumenism of those decades was an ecumenism of return, with all churches returning to the Roman Catholic Church. The Second Vatican Council’s Decree on Ecumenism shifts this understanding by noting that despite our divisions we already experience a real communion among our churches, even if it is imperfect at the moment. So, future unity will not involve renouncing the spiritual gifts that are flourishing in each church, but rather of reconciling them so that unity may be more visible.

Ut unum sint takes this a step further. Pope John Paul II speaks of the unity of the church in the first Christian millennium as being a sort of model of how the unity of the church might be realised. This is not a vision of uniformity, but of genuine catholicity. Catholicity describes the church in the first Christian millennium; catholicity guarantees authentic diversity and recognises its necessity if the church is to be truly the sign of God’s mission in the midst of the diversity that makes up the world. This is not simply an idea that belongs to an earlier millennium; catholicity was the subject of a major study leading up to the Fourth Assembly of the World Council of Churches in Uppsala in 1968. It seems to me that thinking of unity in these terms, as the encyclical does, is a repudiation of an ecumenism of return. This, I believe is a significant achievement. If there was any doubt about this, Pope Benedict XVI stated it plainly in 2005 when addressing an ecumenical gathering in Cologne, Germany, when he said: “Unity does not mean what could be called ecumenism of the return, that is, to
deny and to reject one’s own faith history. Absolutely not! It does not mean uniformity in all expressions of theology and spirituality, in liturgical forms and in discipline. Unity in multiplicity, and multiplicity in unity”. What unity looks like for the Roman Catholic Church is a concern of some of the essays in the book, and it is raised out of a long experience of something different to what I have just described. It is probably also true to say that just because this is the official position of the Roman Catholic Church does not mean that it has yet been fully received throughout that church.

The section of the encyclical that has probably received the most attention is where the pope speaks about the future of the Roman primacy. He is acutely aware that the role of the pope is one of the divisive areas of faith and order for Christians of all ecclesial traditions, so he called on other churches to engage with him in a patient and fraternal dialogue on reforming the Roman primacy so that it might be exercised in a new situation for the service of the whole church. Significantly, he records that the request for such a study came from other Christian churches, notably at the Fifth World Conference on Faith and Order in 1993. That conference called for a study concerning the question of a universal ministry of Christian unity.

I was at that conference and I remember clearly how this came about. The idea was first raised in one of the German language groups. Hence there would have been a strong Protestant (Lutheran) presence in that group. It is noteworthy that the impetus for this study did not come from the Orthodox or Roman Catholics. The report from the conference set out, as it were, the terms of such a study: “Today, ecumenical dialogues should take up once again the topic of a service to the universal unity of the church on the basis of the truth of the Gospel. Such service should be carried out in a pastoral way – that is, as ‘presiding in love’. It should also have the function of speaking for Christianity to the world at large, under conditions that need to be more precisely defined. This ministry must be bound to the community of all the churches and their leaders and is in service to the whole people of God.”

It is surely a sign of the ecumenical times that the pope was listening to the voice of other Christians calling for dialogue on this topic. The response to his invitation is indicative of the influence the encyclical has had in the ecumenical movement. While it is true that the reform of the papacy is far from complete, with *Ut unum sint* we can say that it has well and truly begun. Pope Francis, early in his ministry, stated that we do not seem to have made much
progress on this reform. He is aware that there can be no genuine reform of the Petrine ministry if there is not also a deeper understanding of synodality and a renewal of its practice. Such reform and renewal cannot happen unilaterally, but needs to involve the whole church. This is our situation today and it should feed into our reception of Ut unum sint.

I think we are seeing that twenty-five years on, the encyclical still has the power to encourage further dialogue. The ideas in the encyclical are wide-ranging, and the possibility for dialogue is extensive. The essays in this book can be read as an invitation to dialogue about the church and its unity. Each of the authors has given us a window into their own experience and insights of the ecumenical movement. We should all be grateful to them for this.

I would like to congratulate the Theological Reflections Commission of the NSW Ecumenical Council for the initiative of commissioning these essays. It seems to me that this goes to the heart of why we have an ecumenical council. Among its many tasks is to assist the churches to reflect on the unity they share and to build on that unity so that they keep moving along the road to unity, no matter how slowly.

I would also like to congratulate the editors, Doru and Diane. The editors’ job is rarely easy, as you negotiate with authors about the topic, and later place the essays within the book, and finally see that the whole book is attractively presented. The artwork on the cover of the book is attractive and enticing, and even more so when you read Doru’s account of its story. Doru and Diane have done a fine job.

So, it is with a great deal of pleasure that I launch A Celebration of Ut unum sint The 25th Anniversary. And I encourage you to read the essays and allow them to re-kindled your own passion for the unity of the church.