

Newman, Wesley and the logic of unity: An inductive approach to ecumenism

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It is a privilege to be invited to contribute to the Festschrift dedicated to Professor Johan Buitendag, Emeritus Dean, Faculty of Theology and Religion at the University of Pretoria, South Africa. While his own work often examined the relationship between theology and natural science, he was also passionate about ecumenism and, in that spirit, the present essay utilised what might be described as an inductive approach to an important ecumenical question, the unity between Methodists and Catholics. Ecumenical dialogue is often undertaken from a theological and dogmatic perspective. This essay took a different approach in that it sought to inductively examine what might be described as the inner logic of two ecclesial systems (Methodist and Catholic). In doing so, it was premised upon an Aristotelian philosophical principle, epistemic fit, in that it presupposed that both these ecclesial bodies possess an intrinsic logic that can be brought to the surface in order to exhibit parallel contours in the wider ecclesial terrain.

Contribution: This article fits well within the scope of *HTS Teologiese Studies/Theological Studies* in that it contributed to a new subdiscipline in epistemology, which explores the conceptual and epistemological dimensions of ecclesiology. Using the concept of epistemic fit, the article offered an inductive approach to some of the practical issues that emerge in ecumenical dialogue.

Keywords: epistemic fit; ecumenism; unity; Methodist Catholic dialogue; ecclesiology; John Henry Newman; John Wesley; William Abraham.

Ecumenism takes shape every time a church recognises herself in another church and in that way identifies herself as a member of this one church of Jesus Christ. (Buitendag 2006:801)

Introduction

This article inductively examines what might be described as the inner logic of two ecclesial systems (Catholic and Methodist) so as to identify similarities and, moreover, to remove obstacles to full organic unity between them. It is an epistemological evaluation of the subject of ecclesiology in that it applies a principle frequently utilised by Saint John Henry Newman, what William Abraham has termed Aristotelian 'epistemic fit', to the discourse on unity between Methodists and Catholics. Utilising this principle, it explores whether or not the (actual) movement initiated by John Wesley can be integrated into the Catholic church of today. In examining this possibility, it indicates that the key to unlocking some of the divisions between Christians is to uncover the epistemological moves operative in their respective conceptions of the church.

The logic of unity?

In recent years, Frederick Aquino, a leading Newman commentator, and his former doctoral supervisor, the renowned Methodist thinker William Abraham (of late), have argued for the creation of a new sub-discipline for examining the epistemology of theology:

It has been commonplace in epistemology ... to explore in detail the epistemology of particular academic disciplines. The epistemology of science, for example, has received the lion's share of interest; but attention has also been given to mathematics, history, aesthetics, and ethics. The crucial warrant for these later developments goes back to Aristotle's insistence ... [that] we should fit our epistemic evaluations in an appropriate way to the subject matter under investigation. (Abraham & Aquino 2017:1)

These writers maintain that it is necessary to explore what might constitute appropriate epistemological evaluation in the various branches of theology. The influence of Aristotle's (2004)

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Nicomachean Ethics on this approach is significant and is illustrated in an earlier publication by Abraham (2006) on this subject:

With Aristotle I have insisted that we should accept the principle of appropriate epistemic fit. We should let the subject matter in hand shape what kinds of considerations should be brought to bear on the rationality of the issue under review. (p. 29)

Here Abraham (2006:29) maintains that theologians should 'help themselves to the same liberties as the historian and natural scientist' and be content to 'take for granted a whole network of epistemic platitudes that can be assumed'. However, he not only applies this Aristotelian principle to theology generally but also applies it to ecclesiology.

In a discussion of the 'conceptual and epistemological dimensions' of ecclesiology, Abraham (2010:170, 182) argues that it is important for us to attend to the 'conceptual and epistemological' issues that emerge in ecumenical debates concerning the true nature of the church. He writes:

We have to grapple with disputes about what constitutes the essence of the church. This is exactly what we find in ecclesiology and in ecumenical work ... Outsiders often dismiss the whole debate as empty of cognitive content; after all, there is no universal or stable agreement on the criteria of appraisal in play. This disposition betrays a narrowness of conceptual sensibility. What is, in fact, at issue is how best to capture the complexity and beauty of the life of the church. (Abraham 2010:174)

Here, and elsewhere Abraham (1998) suggests that a key for unlocking some of the divisions between Christians is to uncover the epistemological moves operative in their respective conceptions of the 'church'. However, he is emphatic that this epistemological analysis should proceed in a manner appropriate to the case in hand. In making this point, he regularly invokes Saint John Henry Newman's (Abraham 2003:166, 2006:51, 2010:178) 'felicitous' utilisation of the same Aristotelian principle.¹

Newman and the logic of the church

Abraham's clarion call for an appropriate epistemological analysis of the nature and concept of the 'church' is distinctive. Aside from his writings, only a handful of essays have been published in this area (Kirmmse 2000; Pratt Morris-Chapman 2018; Quinn 2006). Moreover, with the exception of Abraham (2006:28–30), none of these writers explicitly applies the principle of Aristotelian epistemic fit to ecumenism. However, while Abraham's work is original, his theoretical approach is shaped considerably by Newman's use of the same aspect of Aristotle's *Nicomachean Ethics* (Pratt Morris-Chapman 2021:97–99). Indeed, long before Abraham, Newman utilised this Aristotelian principle to examine the inner logic of theological and ecclesial systems, dissecting their inner constitution in order to expose their intrinsic presuppositions and principles (Hammond 2009:162). This is

1. For further discussion of Newman's philosophical influence on Abraham, see *Newman in the Story of Philosophy* (Pratt Morris-Chapman 2021).

powerfully evident in Newman's (1845) penetrating analysis of Wesleyanism:

Wesleyanism represents an idea, a doctrine, system, and polity; no one but will connect it with the well-known divine and preacher whose name it bears. Yet, when we look back upon its course during the ... years since it commenced, how many are the changes and vicissitudes through which the man is connected with his work! so much so that it is a most difficult task, and one which perhaps must be reserved for a later age, duly to review its history, to say what really belongs and what is foreign to it, to find a key for the whole and a clue for the succession of its parts. The event alone still future, which will bring its completion, will also bring its interpretation. (p. 39)

Here we see how Newman attempts to uncover the essence and indeed the internal logic operative in Methodism.² Even more profound, however, is Newman's application of the same Aristotelian principle to his crisis of faith – his personal attempt to resolve a dilemma concerning the perceived difference between the Catholicism of his day and that of the Primitive Church of the Early Christian Centuries (Newman LD 7:136, 154).

In his *Essay on the Development of Christian Doctrine*, Newman states that 'the true principle of historical logic' is exemplified in the 'well-known maxim of Aristotle' (Newman 1878:113–114). Citing Aristotle, he writes:

'It is much the same to admit the probabilities of a mathematician, and to look for demonstration from an orator'. Some things admit of much closer and more careful handling than others – and we must look for proof in every case according to the nature of the subject matter which is in debate, and not beyond it. Evidence may have an air of nature even in its deficiencies, and it recommends itself to us, when it carries with it its explanation why it is such as it is, not fuller or more exact. (Newman 1845:139)

This reference to Aristotle at this point in his work is significant for Newman intends to evaluate the logic governing the historical development of the Catholic Church's teaching in a manner appropriate to the case in hand. Thus, under the heading 'Character of the Evidence', Newman's intention is to uncover a logical connection between the teaching of the Early Church and the Catholic doctrines upheld by his contemporaries. His solution to this quandary – the idea of doctrinal development – is ingenious, but it does not concern us here. Here, our focus will rather be upon whether Newman's use of this Aristotelian principle can help remove perceived obstacles to full organic unity between Methodists and Catholics: Whether we can successfully make a connection between early Methodist practices and the Catholic Church of today.

The reason for applying this aspect of Newman's thought to the question of Catholic and Methodist unity may not be

2. Though Newman considered Methodism to be a heresy, he acknowledged that 'never surely was a heresy so mixed up with what was good and true with high feeling and honest exertion ... if the choice lay between [Wesley] and the reformers of the sixteenth century, as we thankfully acknowledge it does not, a serious inquirer would have greater reason for saying *Sit anima mea cum Westleio than cum Luthero or cum Calvino*' (Newman 1840:263–264).

immediately apparent. However, if we look at the problem of division, we are in fact faced with a quandary similar to the one faced by the Anglican Newman immediately prior to his reception into the Catholic fold. Newman, the Anglican, was convinced that the Church must be one. He was also convinced of the validity of the Early Church's teaching. His difficulty prior to writing the essay on development was how he could connect the teachings of the Catholic Church with the teachings of the Undivided Church of Antiquity. In a similar vein, we know and believe Jesus' command that we must be one (Jn 10:16). Moreover, as Wainwright (1983:4) powerfully articulates, it is very difficult to deny that God's Holy Spirit is working in and through us all, despite our frailties. This resonates with our collective experience, but it has also been officially stated by the Second Vatican Council and by the founder of the Methodist Church (Holy See, UR 1964b:§3; Wesley 1872:5.493). Therefore, there is acknowledgment, on both sides, of the reality of our walk with Christ, despite the challenges before us. However, while some have abandoned all hope of unlocking the differences between us, it is conceivable that Newman (a prospective Doctor of the Church) offers us principles by which the obstacles to full organic unity might be resolved.

Framing the problem under discussion

Here, the problem will be framed in a particular way. We will not attempt to resolve the differences between contemporary Catholicism and the plethora of Methodist traditions that exist at present. Instead, I will ask whether or not Newman's methodology can help us to reconcile Wesley's vision of Methodism with the Catholic Church of today. In short, can the form of Methodism envisaged by Wesley be integrated within the contours of contemporary Catholicism?³

John Wesley's discipleship movement shaped for mission

It is helpful at this juncture to offer a 'clear consistent view of Methodism as a phenomenon' to consider it 'as a whole' (Newman 1840:276). To isolate what 'really belongs' to Methodism and 'what is foreign to it' (Newman 1845:39)? To determine what might be considered to be the heart of Methodism, we must go back to the beginning. Wesley himself states that the seeds of the movement were sown in Oxford, Georgia and London (Wesley 1872:13.303). In all these instances, we see that his overwhelming quest was to lead a holy life and to help others to do the same.

³This approach to full organic unity is inspired by the Nairobi Report, which states that 'from one perspective the history of John Wesley has suggested an analogy between his movement and the religious orders within the one Church. Figures such as Benedict of Norcia and Francis of Assisi, whose divine calling was similarly to a spiritual reform, gave rise to religious orders characterized by special forms of life and prayer, work, evangelization and their own internal organization. The different religious orders in the Roman Catholic Church, while fully in communion with the Pope and the bishops, relate in different ways to the authority of Pope and bishops. Such relative autonomy has a recognized place within the unity of the Church' (MERC 1986:§24).

The Oxford Holy Club

Let us begin by looking at his time in Oxford. In the 1720s, Oxford was not the special university it is today. It was a decadent place academically and morally (Green 1961:21–27). However, John Wesley's parents, particularly his mother, had made an enormous impact upon his spiritual development (Newton 1968:108; Wallace 1997:118). This led him to seek to live a holy life, despite these university surroundings. During this period, John states that he:

Began to alter the whole form of my conversation and to set in earnest upon a new life. I set apart an hour or two a day for religious retirement. I communicated every week. I watched against all sin whether in word or deed. I began to aim and pray for inward holiness. (Wesley 1872:1.99)

This extract from his journal illustrates his spiritual condition during this period (Pollock 1989:21–29). He wanted desperately to be holy and his diary is full of notes about his failure to keep resolutions that he believed would help him to obtain this (Heitzenrater 1984:28–33). His brother Charles also began a similar quest for holiness at Oxford (Dallimore 1988:30ff). Like John before him he also struggled to live a holy life, attending holy communion every week and examining himself thoroughly (Collins 2003:43). Moreover, Charles tried to follow the university's rules, which advised students to spend time in study and prayer. When Charles and his friends tried to follow this, they were nicknamed 'Methodists'. Undeterred, they began to meet regularly to read the scriptures, Christian literature, and to assist one another in being holy. While this 'Holy Club' started when John was serving his curacy, on his return to Oxford the leadership of the group transferred to him – he had a gift for taking charge (Pollock 1989:142–149). As time passed, what had begun as a 'Holy club' for students was translated into a desire to help others to do the same. The group was influenced increasingly by the devotional practices of the earliest Christians and sought to realise them both in the university and in the city at large (Green 1961:169–179). This led to a zealous attempt, not only to obtain inward holiness but also to witness the love of God practically to those around them, particularly prisoners and those in need (Tyerman 1872:57–58).

Restoring primitive Christianity in Georgia

As the years passed, Wesley concluded that it would be impossible to restore the devotional practices of the Early Church in a context as corrupt as Oxford. When the opportunity arose to serve as a missionary in Georgia, he mistakenly inferred that it would be far easier to implement the 'Primitive' faith of the Church among the American Indians (Wesley 1872:12.38). He fancied that, while Oxford was too corrupt for the Christianity of the First Ages, the American context would be ripe for it (Green 1961:237–243). Unfortunately, his parishioners in Savannah, Georgia were anything but First Century Christians. Nevertheless, John Wesley continued with the same resolve and attempted to adapt the Anglican Prayer Book to make it more

commensurate with the liturgical practice of the Early Church. He also introduced ancient practices that he believed would foster holiness among the parishioners (Hammond 2016:130; Kimbrough 2020:9). This manifested itself in the following ways:

- He encouraged them to partake of the Eucharist weekly.
- To confess their sins to him before attending the Eucharist.
- Encouraged them to fast regularly in accordance with the practices of the Early Church.
- Meeting in small devotional groups for prayer, exhortation, mutual accountability and instruction.
- Lay leadership for the small groups.
- Deaconesses.

These last two points were absent in the church of his day. While the ministry of deaconesses and lay preachers was formally established in the 19th century, in the 18th century, the Church of England did not permit either. However, Wesley saw these clearly in the Early Church. Thus, by appointing female deaconesses John Wesley violated orthodox Anglican practice because he realised that in the Early Church, their ministry was celebrated (Hammond 2016:136; Kimbrough 2020:4). Here, we see a clear example of how John Wesley prophetically adopted apostolic forms of ministry even when these were absent in the Church of his time. Equally, his use of lay leaders to teach the Word to smaller groups of disciples is clearly present in the practice of the Early Church, even though it was absent in his time. His approach, even his support of lay leaders and female deaconesses, was unquestionably grounded in the practices of the Early Church. Indeed, what is most interesting here is that Wesley's apostolic revisions were rejected as 'Catholic' by his parishioners, whose irritation with him grew until he was forced to flee America (Hammond 2016:140–141; Kimbrough 2020:7).

Crystallisation in London

At this juncture, there is a temptation within Wesleyan scholarship to conclude that he jettisoned his earlier reverence for the teaching and devotional practices of the earliest Christian centuries. While it is true that the hatred he had provoked in America, and his personal struggles in the faith, led him to conclude that he had gone too far in cutting and pasting apostolic practices onto the present, his appreciation for the Apostolic Faith remained (Hunter 1968:54–56). Hence while it is true that, on his return to London, Wesley came to question some of the things he had crudely copied and pasted onto the Georgian context, it is clear that, before returning to England, Wesley had formed a conception of holiness from the Christians of the earliest centuries. This vision continued to guide him in that he considered it to be consistent with scriptural holiness. Thus, while he had failed to realise his vision of Primitive Christianity in Georgia, he nevertheless had become convinced of certain apostolic principles as can be illustrated by a variety of examples (Hunter 1968:54).

The following examples highlight the way in which Wesley attempted to contextualise Early Christian practices in 18th century Britain.⁴ He encouraged early morning services, as was the common practice in the first three centuries, calling them 'cockcrow' services. In a similar vein, he called vigils 'watch nights' and agape meals 'love feasts' (Hunter 1968:59–60).⁵ While in the early church, there were 'catechumens', Wesley organised converts into 'classes' and 'bands'. These 'classes' were formed to enable mutual accountability and the pursuit of holiness. Members of classes made personal confession in the group and they prayed for one another. Those who progressed well were then invited to be part of 'bands' – another level of Christian discipleship for those who had evidenced progression in holiness. Wesley tried to discipline the 'Class' and 'Band' members in a manner comparable to the primitive church. He issued what he called 'class tickets' and these were required for admission to 'love feasts' (agape meals). This was very similar in many ways to the practice of the early church. Moreover, he appointed lay class leaders to train the classes, and he consulted with these before allowing members to have tickets – withholding tickets from those who were not progressing in the faith. When someone fell into sin, they were not given penances, but Wesley did prescribe special prayers, exhortations and even the singing of certain hymns. Here again we see an attempt by Wesley to contextualise what he believed to be the practices of the early church. Wesley encouraged the formation of lay leaders, 'helpers', who would evangelise, give exhortations, lead prayers and offer pastoral oversight. Moreover, Wesley encouraged the ministry of 'sick visitors' who resembled Apostolic Deaconesses (Hunter 1968:59, 61–62).

The above indicates that Wesley consciously tried to draw parallels between his 'extraordinary' mission and what he understood to be the practices of the early church. In all of this, Wesley maintained and was driven by his firm belief that true holiness must be an inward holiness, entailing purity of intention and the calling to be perfect as God is perfect. These principles were the foundation of his ministry even if the practices he deployed in Georgia evolved on his return to London. This indicates that those who would claim that Wesley later abandoned all thought of these Early Christian principles are mistaken (Hunter 1968:54–56).

In stating the above, it remains true that the outward form of Wesley's ministry was reshaped so as to 'serve the present age' (Wesley 1872:9.59). However, while his actions sometimes led him to deviate from 18th century Anglican practice, he continued to affirm the importance of the Church's apostolic ministry, believing Deacons, Priests and Bishops to be of divine appointment. Nevertheless, while affirming this structure he recognised the 'extraordinary'

4.This is illustrated by Whitefield's own justification of the Methodist Societies 'stedfast in the Apostles Doctrine Take then my Brethren the primitive Christians for your Ensampl'es Their Practices are recorded for our learning No Power on Earth can forbid or hinder your imitating them' (Whitefield 1742:7).

5.In addition to the above, Wesley remained committed to fasting. Although he no longer demanded people to fast on Wednesdays and Fridays like the early church, he insisted that fasting was pivotal for the Christian life (Hunter 1968:57–58).

missionary situation in which he found himself following the huge success of his field preaching (Hunter 1968:58). While he had possessed no intention or desire for preaching outside, in such a 'vile' way, this extraordinary situation led him to conclude that God was calling extraordinary messengers to be evangelists. This in no way displaced his conception of church order (indicated above) but rather was fused into it in the sense that God was doing something special, and it was necessary to be obedient to the Holy Spirit in this extraordinary missionary situation (Hunter 1968:58).

Wesley (1872:12.274; 1931:4.146) proclaimed and indeed did 'live and die a member of the Church of England'. However, it must be acknowledged that his extraordinary calling led him into conflict with the church he loved, so much so that the question was posed in 1788 as to whether the Methodists should formally separate from the Church of England:

One of the most important points considered at this Conference was, that of leaving the Church. The sum of a long conversation was, That, in a course of fifty years, we had, neither premeditatedly nor willingly, varied from it in one article, either of doctrine or discipline. 2. That we were not yet conscious of varying from it in any point of doctrine. 3. That we have, in a course of years, out of necessity, not choice, slowly and warily varied in some points of discipline, by preaching in the fields, by extempore prayer, by employing lay preachers, by forming and regulating societies, and by holding yearly Conferences. But we did none of these things till we were convinced we could no longer omit them but at the peril of our souls. (Tyerman 1872:547–548)

In the above, we discern the key practical differences between Wesley's Methodism and the Church of England of his day. He encouraged lay leadership, evangelical preaching by the laity outside the doors of the church, the use of extempore prayer, the formation of preaching houses, societies in which members of small groups (bands and classes) confessed their sins to each other, studied the Scriptures together, prayed together and were disciplined predominantly by lay leaders (Rack 1987:586; George Whitefield 1742:16). However, here it is important to clarify that these features of the Methodist movement were not incommensurate with Anglicanism. Indeed, as a Tractarian, Newman acknowledged that if 'a place [could] not be found' for 'field preaching', 'repentance' and 'conversion', then the 18th century Church was in a sorry state 'claims to be the Church'. Indeed, Newman maintains that, had the Church been in better health, it would have found a place 'in her economy' for 'Wesley and Whitfield ... as truly as St. Francis, or St. Philip Neri' (Newman 1840:275–276). Indeed, it is clear that Wesley did not intend to create a separate church but a discipleship movement shaped for mission (Atkins 2007; Walton 2015). This is confirmed by his refusal to allow lay preachers to preside at the Eucharist and his insistence that Methodist meetings should not take place on Sunday when he encouraged all Methodists to receive communion in their local Anglican parish churches.

Wesley saw his ministry as an extraordinary apostolic calling to evangelise British Isles, to spread Scriptural Holiness

throughout the land (Deed of Union 1932). He was not a schismatic, but he did take extraordinary measures to ensure that those who hunger and thirst for righteousness could be filled (Mt 5:6). While this at times brought him into tension with the Church of England, he concluded that he must be faithful to the calling he had received:

What is the end of all ecclesiastical order? Is it not to bring souls from the power of Satan to God, and to build them up in his fear and love? Order, then, is so far valuable as it answers these ends; and if it answers them not, it is worth nothing. (Wesley 1931:VII.6)

Here we gain an insight into Wesley's particularist approach to ecclesiology, whereby the missionary imperative is paramount. In a similar vein, *Lumen Gentium* reminds us that:

The Catholic Church strives constantly and with due effect to bring all humanity and all its possessions back to its source In Christ, with Him as its head and united in His Spirit. (Holy See, LG 1964a:§12)

Integrating Wesley's vision into the Catholic church of today

In the above, we have identified what might be considered the essential components of Wesley's discipleship movement shaped for mission. To summarise, it entails:

- scriptural holiness (inward and outward)
- lay evangelists (male and female) preaching outside the Church under Wesley's supervision
- small discipleship groups led by lay people (male and female) under Wesley's supervision
- the central place of extempore prayer.

Having identified some of the essential features of Wesley's movement, I now want to explore whether or not Wesley's movement can coherently be incorporated within the Catholic church of today (MERC Nairobi Report 1986:§24).

The call to holiness

There is no need here to discuss the universal call to holiness, which has been affirmed by both our traditions in the Methodist Catholic Dialogue in the Catholic church (MERC Houston 2016:§69). Moreover, John Wesley's understanding of the central place of holiness is shaped considerably by the Catholic tradition (Colón-Emeric 2009). However, I think it is helpful here to explore whether the central role given to lay preaching in Methodism coheres with the teaching of the Catholic Church.

An extraordinary calling

Hammond (2016) maintains that Wesley's ministry in an American context, not so dissimilar to the context that inspired the Amazon synod, shaped by the foundations of the extraordinary revival in Britain. Indeed, the special circumstances in which the Church finds herself ministering in today have provoked important reflections about the nature of the Church's ministry:

In the specific circumstances of the Amazon region ... The laity can proclaim God's word, teach, organize communities, celebrate certain sacraments, seek different ways to express popular devotion and develop the multitude of gifts that the Spirit pours out in their midst. But they need the celebration of the Eucharist because it 'makes the Church'. We can even say that 'no Christian community is built up which does not grow from and hinge on the celebration of the most holy Eucharist'. (Holy See, QA 2019:§89)

Here we see the Church wrestling with questions not dissimilar to the challenges facing Wesley. An extraordinary revival compelled him to step outside the ecclesiological contours of his tradition in order to explore new ways of fostering ministry. In a similar manner, the Synod affirmed that the Church's ministry in the Amazon requires the development of a 'distinctively lay' ecclesial culture in order for the Amazon peoples to receive both 'God's word and growth in holiness' (Holy See, QA 2019:§93).

Lay preachers

This is not for a moment intended to diminish the three orders of ministry (Bishop, Priest and Deacon). To his death, Wesley upheld the teaching that only ordained priests should preside at the Eucharist. So too, the Catholic Church upholds the necessity of the ordained ministry. Nevertheless, as Wesley equipped lay people to carry out the evangelistic mission to which he believed God had called his people, so the *Querida Amazonia* reminded the Church that:

Priests are necessary, but this does not mean that permanent deacons (of whom there should be many more in the Amazon region), religious women and lay persons cannot regularly assume important. (Holy See, QA 2019:§92-93)

This echoes *Apostolicam Actuositatem* (1965), which states that where Catholics are 'widely dispersed' the laity need 'for special reasons', do 'what they can to take the place of priests' (AA 1965:§17). In like manner, *Querida Amazonia* states that:

A Church of Amazonian features requires the stable presence of mature and lay leaders endowed with authority and familiar with the languages, cultures, spiritual experience and communal way of life in the different places, but also open to the multiplicity of gifts that the Holy Spirit bestows on every one. (Holy See, QA 2019:§94)

These points echo *Christifideles Laici* (Holy See 1988:§27), which strongly encouraged the laity to 'reawaken' with 'missionary zeal' for a more 'extensive spreading of the gospel' far wider than would be possible without them. From the above, it is clear that, under extraordinary circumstances, bishops may entrust deacons and lay persons to undertake important pastoral responsibilities. However, it is important to recognise that while Wesley deemed the circumstances in which he found himself to be extraordinary, it remains the case that lay preaching was absolutely intrinsic to the Methodist revival and remains a central feature of Methodism. This indicates that it is not simply an emergency measure, permissible in emergency situations, but a fundamental part

of the Methodist movement. Does this cohere with the Catholic church of today?

The Catholic Church is clear that: 'the whole Church is missionary, and the work of evangelization is a basic duty of the People of God'. All Christians have a 'responsibility for spreading the Gospel' and 'may do their share in missionary work among the nations' (Holy See, *Ad Gentes* 1965:§35; MERC Singapore 1991:§58). In *Apostolicam Actuositatem*, it states that 'lay people' are called to 'announce Christ' and to 'explain and spread his teaching' and that 'innumerable opportunities' should be 'open to the laity for the exercise of their apostolate of evangelisation and sanctification' (AA 1965:§6). In *Evangelii Gaudium*, Pope Francis likewise states that 'there is a kind of Preaching which falls to each of us' (Holy See, EG 2013:§127). While it is apparent that this statement refers to informal forms of preaching, outside the church, it is also clear that the evangelical preaching undertaken by Wesley's lay preachers was also undertaken 'on the street[s]' in 'city square[s]' and indeed during many arduous 'journey[s]' wherein lay evangelists traversed the British Isles to proclaim the gospel (Holy See, EG 2013:§127). This suggests that the kinds of preaching that Wesley and his preachers undertook outside the doors of the church are coherent with current Catholic teaching. While there remain a number of questions here, it is possible to envisage a way in which lay preaching of this kind can be commensurate with Catholic teaching.⁶

Small discipleship groups led by the laity

Having explored the place of lay preaching I now want to explore the place of small discipleship groups within the Catholic tradition. Here we turn again to *Apostolicam Actuositatem* (1965), which encourages lay people to 'gather into smaller groups for serious conversation', so as to give 'spiritual help to one another through friendship and the communicating of the benefit of their experience' (AA 1965:§18). Moreover, it encourages them to be intimately involved in 'catechetical instruction' by offering their 'skills to make the care of souls' more effective and by 'giving spiritual help' (AA 1965:§10). *Evangelii Nuntiandi* (Holy See 1975) likewise states that these communities nurture the 'bond of the agape' by offering space for 'worship, deepening of faith, fraternal charity, prayer' and for 'listening to and meditating on the Word'. While this is particularly true in places where the 'shortage of priests does not favor the normal life of a parish community', it is acknowledged that these groups offer a way for believers to 'live the Church's life more intensely' (EN 1975:§58). The social dimension of this is reinforced in *Querida Amazonia*, which also encourages the formation of small groups, not only for the purposes of evangelism and discipleship but in order to inspire social holiness by defending the rights of others 'with missionary proclamation and spirituality' (Holy See, QA 2019:§96). This indicates that groups such as the class and band meetings,

6.No one would deny, including Wesley himself, that 'serious preparation is needed for all workers of evangelisation'. This clearly indicates that appropriate training should be given to all those called to be itinerant preachers and evangelists (EN 1975:§73).

which made an enormous spiritual and social contribution during the Methodist revival and after, are coherent with the Catholic tradition.

The place of extempore prayer

The important place given to extempore prayer for the Methodist tradition is affirmed in the *Call to Holiness*, which indicates how it 'has always been at the heart of Methodist worship' (CH 2016:§85). While the Catholic Church has, over time, been concerned to ensure the orthodoxy of prayers conducted during public mass, it remains clear that the most ancient liturgical texts (*Didaché*) gave considerable space for extempore prayer. Nevertheless, while it remains the case that in public masses vocal prayers are written, celebrations of the mass with children and young people allow space for spontaneous prayer. Moreover, spontaneous prayer is possible in a private mass for groups (Holy See, *Ordinamento Generale Del Messale Romano* 2007:§69–71). This suggests that there is scope to incorporate this central aspect of Wesley's movement into the Church of today.

Wesley's *consociationes cristifidelium*?

The Code of Canon Law has described groups of laity gathered with a common purpose as *piae uniones* [Pious Associations], later called *consociationes cristifidelium* (Holy See, Code of Canon Law 1983; Can. 298 §1). This description resonates with the appellation given by Wesley to the Methodist 'societies', which were intended to complement, and not substitute, the ministry of the Church of his day (Rack 1987:582). In like manner, *consociationes cristifidelium* [societies of the Christian faithful] are associations of the Christians that operate in a similar way. Here I turn to *Christifideles laici* (Holy See 1988), which indicates that there is ample 'freedom for lay people in the Church to form such groups' (Holy See, CL 1988:§29). The same principle would it seems apply to a religious movement like early Methodism should an equivalent contemporary association (analogous to the movement founded by Wesley) seek to be integrated into the church and come under its authority (Holy See, CL 1988:§29). Hence, the question as to whether a contemporary, lay religious association of Christian faithful – equivalent in shape to the contours of the movement presided over by John Wesley to spread scriptural holiness throughout the land – can be integrated into the Catholic Church of today.

Further questions

There are of course, a number of unresolved questions here – not least the question as to the role of priests, or even Methodist presbyters (many of whom are married), in the oversight of such a movement. Moreover, there are also significant theological difficulties to be surmounted that I have not even begun to address. Nevertheless, six decades of Methodist Catholic dialogue have made an enormous contribution in this regard, and I do not believe these

doctrinal questions present an insurmountable obstacle to full organic unity. Moreover, it is to be remembered that, theologically, Wesley died an Anglican and the fruit of the Anglican-Roman Catholic International Commission (ARCIC) indicates that considerable agreement is possible between the Anglican faith upheld by John Wesley and the contemporary Catholic faith (Lambeth Conference 1988:§8). However, here I think it is sufficient to say that, should a group of Christians seek to form an association analogous to the form of Methodism envisaged by John Wesley I trust that it could successfully be integrated into the life of the Catholic Church of today. Let me close with a quote from Newman (1840):

Whatever spiritual gift Whitfield and Wesley possessed, it came, as from the Most High, so through His Church. By the Church they were baptized, by the Church they were ordained; from the Church they received the creed ... She gave them the grace of baptism, in order that they might show forth their light, or rather her light in them; she ordained them, in order that they might preach repentance and gather souls into her bosom. (pp. 294–295)

Conclusion

In conclusion, it would appear from the above that an inductive approach to ecumenism has considerable potential. Indeed, the application of what Abraham terms Aristotelian 'epistemic fit' to the question of Catholic Methodist unity, reveals an intrinsic logic, which illustrates how full organic unity might be possible. This indicates that an inductive approach enables powerful insights for ecumenical dialogue in that it uncovers the epistemological moves operative within ecclesial systems. In sum, the above would suggest that the epistemological evaluation of ecclesiology, as a key for unlocking some of the divisions between Christians, is a useful component within ecumenical dialogue and reflection.

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