New Blackfriars

DOI:10.1111/nbfr.12774

Comment: The Saint Margaret Declaration

In May 2022, at the annual General Assembly of the Church of Scotland in New College, Edinburgh, the delegates (some 550 elders and ministers) endorsed with enthusiasm the Saint Margaret Declaration of Friendship between the Church of Scotland and the Catholic Church in Scotland, a new and somewhat unexpected ecumenical initiative.

Friendship is proposed as the path to a new turn in the history of ecumenism. Introducing the document, Revd Alexander Horsburgh, Convener of the Ecumenical Relations Committee, declared 'friendship' to be a thoroughly Scriptural theme, though not documenting it in detail, but spelling it out as follows: 'Friendship is a very deep relationship, a relationship of conscious and deliberate choice, in which individuality is respected and there is room for disagreement, but a relationship in which we stand alongside one another, support one another, rejoice together and weep together, pray for and with each other, and do things together'. How prominent and ubiquitous the theme is in Scripture, of course, any biblical concordance confirms: from Abraham as 'friend of God' (James 2:23), to 'those who keep God's covenant' (Psalm 25:14), and, most authoritatively, to Christ's words 'I call you friends' (John 15: 12–15), to cite only three of the most powerful references. Translating the Scriptural data into systematic theology, Catholics acquainted with the *Summa Theologiae* would happily add that, for St Thomas Aquinas, the relationship of communion with God, which is the gift of the divine virtue of charity, is most appropriately described as 'friendship' (*amicitia*).

In his address, Archbishop Leo Cushley of St Andrews and Edinburgh, speaking for the Conference of the Catholic Bishops of Scotland, the originators of the text, described the Declaration as 'a consciously new approach to ecumenism, an attempt to re-imagine the path of Christian unity'. He went on: 'Instead of listing our problems and points of friction or grievance, old or new, the Declaration chooses to focus on what we have in common, and to underline that we treasure and hold, together, so much that is inspiring, ancient and profound… Do I expect our two old institutions to be perfectly aligned and united any time soon? I suspect that may be a task for another generation. Nevertheless, I believe that by acknowledging all the good that we hold in common, we can walk and pray together as friends, deepen our affective unity, and be a more authentic Christian witness in the land. The rest will come in God's good time'.

© 2022 Provincial Council of the English Province of the Order of Preachers.

https://doi.org/10.1111/nbfr.12774 Published online by Cambridge University Press

Here too there is much for development. Welcoming the Declaration as 'a consciously new approach to ecumenism', glossing it as 'an attempt to re-imagine the path of Christian unity', is an invitation to engage long separated Christians at the level of *imagination*, as distinct (we might say) from the careful pursuit by delegated scholars of doctrinal agreements. For one thing, by naming this ecumenical initiative after Saint Margaret of Scotland, there is obviously a whole raft of unexplored and unexpected symbolism to orient interpretation of the Declaration.

Already, however, there is the symbolism of the Declaration's being signed in the great hall in New College, Edinburgh, which is where the World Missionary Conference was held in 1910, the international gathering of Protestant missionary associations, the origin historically of the modern ecumenical movement. Neither Roman Catholics nor Eastern Orthodox had been invited: back then no one would have expected them to be interested in collaborating with Protestant missionary associations in promoting the reunion of centuries-long divided Christians. Even Anglicans, who were invited, had some reservations about taking part. Among individuals who did attend was the 19-year-old Fleming St John, studying divinity at Cambridge, who was to resign his curacy in 1917 when his bishop refused to allow him to volunteer for the army, got himself received into the Catholic Church at Hawkesyard, and eventually, as Fr Henry St John, O.P., published *Essays in Christian Unity, 1928–1954* (1955), pioneering examples of pre-Vatican II Catholic ecumenism (which appeared originally mainly in this journal). In 1950, we may recall, Pope Pius XII's encyclical *Humani Generis* was still warning Catholics against 'false irenicism'. Only in 1960 when Pope John XXIII set up the Secretariat for Promoting Christian Unity, led by the Jesuit biblical scholar Cardinal Augustin Bea, did Catholics officially begin to enter seriously into ecumenism — a move that led, in key documents at the Vatican Council, to putting the reunion of Christians on the Catholic agenda. In fifty years since then of ups and downs in the history of Catholic ecumenism, the focus has always been on securing enough doctrinal agreement to warrant a degree of sacramental unity — baptismal if not (yet) hierarchical or eucharistic. It may seem time to try something different.

However, as for the choice of Saint Margaret as patron, the ramifications of the symbolism would take a medievalist to unravel. As it happened, this year's newly installed Moderator of the General Assembly, Revd Dr Iain Greenshields, is Minister of St Margaret of Scotland's parish in Dunfermline, over the Firth of Forth from Edinburgh. Speaking for the Catholics, Archbishop Cushley was happy to accept the proposal that the Declaration be named after Saint Margaret, the 11th century Scottish Queen, liturgically commemorated in the Roman Calendar (16 November), and more generally recognised as by far the most influential person in the political and ecclesiastical history

© 2022 Provincial Council of the English Province of the Order of Preachers.
https://doi.org/10.1111/nbfr.12774 Published online by Cambridge University Press

of Scotland. Queen Margaret University is one of the four universities in Edinburgh, created in 1972 out of an existing older institution, while the Queensferry Crossing of the River Forth, the magnificent new bridge opened to traffic in 2017, also refers to Margaret. She is certainly remembered as a major figure, whatever the relevance for ecumenism.

Margaret was canonized in 1249 but, since the documentation of the papal inquiry into her life and miracles has not survived, it is not possible to say whether this recognition by the Catholic Church of her sanctity included awareness of her key role in the fields of both politics and religion. Born around 1046 in Hungary and brought up in the fervently Christian court of the recently deceased King Stephen, Margaret was a child of the Saxon royal family of England, sent into exile by King Canute during the Danish occupation in the hope that they would be murdered. Returning home in 1057 to the court of King Edward the Confessor, another devout Christian, Margaret's family were again exiled after the Norman Conquest (1066), this time seeking asylum in Scotland, which is how this Hungarian raised young Saxon first arrived in Dunfermline at the court of King Malcolm Canmore (Gaelic 'great head'). After his father King Duncan was killed by Macbeth in 1040, young Malcolm spent some 14 years in exile at the English court, returning to Scotland in 1057 to defeat Macbeth. Malcolm, whose wife had died, married Margaret in 1069, when she was about 23. Three of their six sons were successively King of Scots, two of whom count as 'good kings' (Alexander and David), continuing their mother's practice of building up ecclesiastical institutions. (Their daughter Matilda was to marry King Henry I of England, which is how the Mountbatten-Windsor dynasty have a somewhat tenuous ancestral link with the pre-Norman monarchy.) Margaret was a devout and literate woman — her pocket Gospel book survives in the Bodleian Library at Oxford. While she is said to have had a mellowing influence on her husband's warrior temperament — he seems to have treated her as his equal — her principal achievements lay in consolidating the Church institutionally. She revived St Columba's abbey of Iona. To enable pilgrims to travel north to the long-established shrine of St Andrew, she arranged free passage on the ferry over the Forth (from which the towns of South and North Queensferry are named). She built Dunfermline abbey, most of which has long been ruined though the magnificent nave still stands, joined to one of the local Presbyterian parish churches (though not the one of which Dr Greenshields is the minister). According to her biographer, who knew her well, she held a council, which came up with the Five Articles of Margaret as they are traditionally called: Lent changing to Roman custom, receiving the sacrament at Easter, Mass according to the Roman rite, no servile work on Sundays, and not marrying one's stepmother or brother's widow. In short, with these 'reforms', Queen Margaret's influence was in favour of 'Romanizing' the Catholic Church in the Scotland of her day.

© 2022 Provincial Council of the English Province of the Order of Preachers.

https://doi.org/10.1111/nbfr.12774 Published online by Cambridge University Press

In effect, Margaret created at Dunfermline what she had experienced at the Hungarian court and then at the Anglo-Saxon court of Edward the Confessor. The Declaration of Friendship offers 'a decisive and irrevocable statement of our friendship with one another, based on our shared faith in Christ', leaving anything like alignment and unity at an institutional level to a future generation, as Archbishop Cushley says, meanwhile being ready to offer united witness in Scotland to shared faith. While neither in Scotland nor in any other traditionally Christian country is it imaginable that there could be a political leader today with such potent religious effect as Queen Margaret, remembering whom could eventually set off as dramatic a change in intra-Christian relationships as the World Missionary Conference of 1910, it is surely worth allowing 'affective unity', in Archbishop Cushley's phrase, to open the way to 'a consciously new approach to ecumenism'.

Fergus Kerr OP

© 2022 Provincial Council of the English Province of the Order of Preachers.
https://doi.org/10.1111/nbfr.12774 Published online by Cambridge University Press