

# The Church of Rome and Reunion

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No one will deny that in the last twenty years since the Second Vatican Council there has been a wonderful growth in the ecumenical movement among Christians. Not only has the whole climate changed in the relation of the Christian churches to one another, but formal agreement has been reached with Anglicans, Lutherans and reformed churches on such formerly controversial subjects as the Eucharist and the Ministry. But there still remains one insuperable obstacle to Christian unity, which no amount of discussion has so far been able to overcome, and that is the claim of the Roman Church to the 'universal jurisdiction' and the 'infallibility' of the Pope. Is there no way out of this dilemma or is the Ecumenical movement doomed finally to break down at this point?

An answer to this problem has been offered in a recent book published in India<sup>1</sup>, which proposes a solution from the Roman point of view on strictly orthodox lines. Its author is a Spanish Jesuit, Luis Bermejo, who is a professor of theology, formerly dean of the faculty of theology, at the Papal Seminary at Poona. His book consists of a series of articles contributed to theological reviews, which make a careful, scholarly survey of the historical grounds for these doctrines. His contention is that only a strictly historical method can answer the question of the validity of these doctrines. In the past it has been only too easy to read into the evidence of the New Testament and the Fathers the developed doctrine of a later age. But to-day historical method demands that a text should be read strictly within its own context and evaluated in that light and not in that of later developments. We recognise to-day that the Church is a historical institution and its doctrines have overgone a continuous process of change and development.

The basic position, which Father Bermejo reaches after careful study of the history of ecumenical councils, is that the First Vatican Council cannot be considered an ecumenical council in the strict sense. The opinion is apparently growing among Catholic as well as among other theologians that the Roman councils, which took place in the West after the separation of the Roman Church from the Eastern Churches, cannot be called ecumenical in the proper sense, since they excluded all the Eastern Churches. The Second Vatican Council had declared that the Catholic Church 'subsists' in the churches in communion with Rome, but it did not deny that it exists also in the

Eastern Churches. On the contrary, it affirmed that the Eastern Orthodox Churches possess an apostolic tradition with a hierarchy and sacraments which are no less authentic than those of the Roman Church. It seems impossible therefore to consider that a Council which excludes all the Eastern Churches and has never been accepted by them, can be called an ecumenical council in the traditional sense.

But there is yet another reason why the First Vatican Council appears to be defective. It was considered in the ancient Church that the decisions of an ecumenical council should be unanimous. A council was considered to be an occasion not to debate a doctrine but to proclaim the apostolic faith, and as such it normally required unanimity. But at the First Vatican Council there was a strong minority, which opposed the doctrine of papal infallibility right up to the end. Their arguments are now seen to have had far more weight than was previously realised. It has become clear that the doctrine of the universal jurisdiction of the Pope was never accepted by the Eastern Churches. The Roman Church was accorded a primacy of moral and religious authority but not a primacy of jurisdiction. As for infallibility, it is surprising to learn that it was first put forward by a Franciscan, Peter Olivi, in the thirteenth century, only to be denounced by the reigning Pope as a 'pernicious audacity' and was never widely accepted before the nineteenth century. Needless to say, it has never been accepted by the Orthodox Churches or by any other Christian Church.

There is yet another reason why the First Vatican Council cannot be considered to be an ecumenical council. It is coming to be recognised to-day that the ultimate criterion for the ecumenicity of a council is its 'reception' by the whole Church. A doctrinal decree of an ecumenical council is an affirmation of the faith of the Apostolic Church and as such requires to be 'received' by the whole Church. But the decrees of the First Vatican Council have never been 'received' by any Church outside the Roman Communion. In this sense the only councils which can claim to be ecumenical in the full sense are the first seven ecumenical councils. It would seem, therefore, that the doctrine proclaimed in these Councils is the only necessary basis for the reunion of the churches. The decisions of the Roman Councils subsequent to the separation of the churches need therefore not be considered to be binding on other churches nor need they be required to assent to them in the event of reunion.

This raises the question as to what constitutes a 'church' in the proper sense. The second Vatican Council recognised the Orthodox Churches as true churches, but used the expression 'ecclesial communities' for the other churches. But to-day it is coming to be felt that this distinction is not valid, since it judges the other churches in the light of the present Roman system. But if the character of a church

is to be judged primarily, though not exclusively, on the evidence of the New Testament, a very different image emerges. New Testament scholars to-day recognise that neither episcopacy in the proper sense nor papacy are to be found explicitly in the New Testament. They are developments of the ministry in the second century and after, which may rightly be considered to have been guided by the Holy Spirit, but which cannot be considered to be strictly necessary to the conception of the Church as such. Father Bermejo suggests as a 'definition' of a church in the biblical sense, as far as it is capable of definition, 'a communion of believers, baptised into Christ, gathered in the Holy Spirit by the proclamation of the Word of God and the celebration of the Eucharist, guided by pastors and united with other local congregations by a bond of fellowship'. All communities which answer this definition, he suggests, are entitled to be called churches in the biblical sense.

When we have come to this degree of ecumenical understanding, it may well be asked, what remains of the claims of the Pope and the Roman Church to the allegiance of Christians? The answer surely is that the ministry of the Bishop of Rome and the function of the Roman Church in the complex of churches which make up the one Catholic Church, does not need to be interpreted in the precise legal and dogmatic terms of the First Vatican Council, which are now seen to be the product of a particular phase in the history of the Church. If we want to understand the place of the Roman Church in the Catholic Church as a whole, we cannot do better than go back to St. Ignatius in the second century, who with a deep sense of the unity of the whole Church spoke of the Roman Church in the most exalted terms as 'presiding over the charity', or 'presiding in charity'. The exact translation is debatable, but the meaning seems clearly to be that the Catholic Church is seen as a communion of charity, in which the Church of Rome has a pre-eminent place. But even more impressive is the testimony of St Irenaeus, writing in the last half of the same century, who declares that the Roman Church was 'founded by and organised by the two most glorious apostles Peter and Paul' and 'to this Church on account of its pre-eminent authority it is necessary that every Church should resort, that is, the faithful from every side, in which the Church has been preserved by those who are from all sides that tradition which is from the apostles'.

The translation of this text (which is itself a translation) is again debatable, but it shows quite clearly that the position of the Roman Church was central in the Catholic Church in his time and that it rested on the apostolic origin and faith of the Roman Church. The present Pope spoke recently of the Roman Church as a "centre and point of reference" for the other churches. This enables us to see in the Catholic Church a communion of Christian churches which are

united in charity in the profession of a common apostolic faith and recognise in the Church of Rome and its bishop a centre and point of reference in this communion and a ministry of unity on behalf of all the member churches.

This view of the authority of the First Vatican Council may be disturbing and indeed appear revolutionary to many people, yet it would seem that it has to be taken seriously in all ecumenical discussion to-day. Father Bermejo includes in his book a critique of the response of the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith to the Final Report of the ARCIC, in which he shows how much the attitude of Rome depends on an adherence to the decisions of the First Vatican Council which other churches are unable to accept. He concludes that 'the solution may well lie, not in the acceptance of the Vatican dogmas by non-Catholics, but rather in a critical reassessment of Vatican I by Catholics'.

- Luis M. Bermejo, *Towards Christian Reunion: obstacles and opportunities*. Gujarat Sahitya Prakash, India. (Available from St Paul Book Centre, 199 Kensington High Street, London W8.)

## **The Vatican and the Sisters of Mercy: differing views of the Church**

**Rosemary Radford Ruether**

Recent confrontations between the Vatican and the Sisters of Mercy, as well as with other groups of women religious, particularly with Americans, reveal a fundamentally different understanding of the relationship of Church and State, the sacred and the secular, held by the nuns, on the one hand, and the Vatican, on the other. Current Vatican policy assumes a rigid line between Church and State which makes any office-holding, either elected or appointed, in government, by either a priest or a nun, incompatible with the religious vocation. Although the first conflict between the Vatican and Sister Mansour of the Sisters of Mercy appeared to be primarily over differing interpretations of the relationship between personal morality and public policy in the specific case of payments for abortion, subsequent conflicts with the Sisters of Mercy over other nun office-holders went beyond specific differences over Church teachings on moral issues. The holding of any public office was defined as out of bounds for priests or religious: in other words, the Vatican pressed (and continues to press) for a very harsh interpretation of the restriction in the new