

THE AIMS OF CATHOLIC ECUMENISM

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IN a previous BLACKFRIARS article¹ the development of the attitude of the Holy See to the Ecumenical Movement, during thirty years, was traced in outline. This development has followed marked changes in the nature and aims of the movement itself, and these have enabled the Holy See, while still remaining aloof from ecumenical organisation, to encourage the Catholic episcopate in fostering its own 'reunion' work on ecumenical lines, in close touch with the movement. The principles of a Catholic ecumenism, with necessary safeguards against the dangers to be met with in their application, are embodied in the *Instruction to local ordinaries on the Ecumenical Movement*, issued in December 1949 by the Sacred Congregation of the Holy Office. This document is a charter and guide for Catholics in the work of promoting the unity of Christendom among our own countrymen.

The purpose of the present article is to discuss, tentatively and by way of suggestion, the lines of action by which Catholic ecumenical work could be applied to the religious situation in England today. Between Catholics and their non-Catholic countrymen who are professing Christians, there lies a formidable psychological barrier; a barrier which keeps in being distorted ideas of the doctrines that divide Christendom, and hinders the realisation by non-Catholics of the direction in which true Christian unity lies. The aim of Catholic ecumenism is to work, from our side, for the removal of this psychological barrier by the same methods and in the same spirit with which the non-Catholic ecumenists are working from theirs. The non-Catholic ecumenist may object that this is not, and cannot be, true ecumenical work, but is rather the proselytising spirit of Catholicism in borrowed clothes. True ecumenism, he would say, renounces convert-making and aims only at promoting corporate growth towards truth, in each separate tradition, until the day when all achieve a common unity in Christ. To the

¹ *The Catholic Church and Ecumenism*. October 1952.

charge of convert-making the Catholic ecumenist will reply that unfair proselytism is reprobated by all men of good will, but that every Church has a duty to proclaim what it holds to be true; that Catholics believe that faith is a free gift of God, acceptance of which lies with the individual conscience, and that where it is evident that the act of choice in accepting the Catholic Church is governed by genuine obedience to conscience it must be regarded as right, though it may be deplored as error. Catholics themselves accept the same conditions in the reverse process, though they regard all genuine loss of faith as in some degree culpable.

To the assertion that a Catholic cannot be imbued with the true ecumenical spirit, because the exclusiveness of the Catholic claim negatives the very aim of the movement, the Catholic ecumenist will answer that, by its own testimony, the movement excludes no Christian body because it is compelled by its tenets to deny to other Christian bodies the title of Church, in a true and proper sense. This is shown by the presence at its conferences of delegates from various Eastern Orthodox Churches. Catholics believe their Church to be unique in the possession of the fullness of Christ's gifts and revelation, guaranteed in perpetuity to it by the indwelling of the Holy Spirit. They hold this because they believe that Christ founded one Church, with a visible unity permanently secured and indestructible, because it is his mystical body, and in it he exercises his lordship over men. Through this body he mediates to men his redemption, made available in his eucharistic body, present and sacrificed sacramentally under his signs.

Each individual member of the mystical body on earth is a sinful man and stands under the judgment of Christ's lordship in his Church. From this judgment men have only been exempt in a single capacity, as instruments of his word; when writing his word in the Scriptures, and when interpreting it and distinguishing it from human opinion by the living voice of his Church. This latter is the office of the universal episcopate, in union with, and under the supreme teaching authority of, the Holy See. Like the human authors of Scripture, the living voice of the Church, when proclaiming his revealed truth, cannot be subject to God's judgment

because as such it speaks the very word of God. Apart from this, at all times and in every action, even when these are actions of high authority demanding obedience in Christ's name by right, the members of Christ's mystical body stand under the rebuke of God's judgment if they fail to live the truth that he gives them and to use his gifts of grace; they stand bound, too, to amend their failure in conformity with his word. This failure has appeared, and does appear, in places of highest authority, among all classes of society and in every age. It has been greater and more widespread at some periods than in others, and has shown itself in neglect on the part of the Shepherds and indifference among the flock. It has produced ignorance, sloth and distortion of truth, where the gospel has been inadequately preached and its principles left unapplied. To these things the pages of history bear undeniable witness, and Catholics, no less than the rest of Christendom, must acknowledge to the full their share of responsibility for the schisms that have been thus caused.

Nor does our religion allow us to dogmatise concerning God's dealings with those who, through no fault of their own, are cut off from the visible unity of the mystical body. God's ordinances are given to his Church for the benefit of mankind, and though we must maintain them, his sovereign power is in no way bound to act only through their agency. We know that baptism, rightly administered and received, makes men members of the visible Church which is Christ's body, and though that visible communion may be lost without personal fault the invisible relationship of grace with Christ in his Church conferred by it can only be destroyed by grievous personal sin. Moreover, since Christ died for all men, it is reasonable to suppose that, in some way beyond our knowledge, to all men unbaptised is given, by a kind of implicit desire, the chance of grace and salvation. We are taught too that other sacraments, administered according to conditions which safeguard Christ's purpose made known to his Church, yet given and received outside its visible unity, are effective vehicles of the grace they signify. Beyond that we know nothing certain, for this is God's concern, not ours. He is not tied to his own ordinances, and when these have

been lost or disfigured by human failure the Holy Spirit has power to make good his gifts without them.

We can make our own then the words written, from their very different point of view, of the Anglican Evangelical group:² '... schism, we are convinced, can only be healed by a love deep enough and sacrificial enough to bear the strain involved in the bringing together of the separated traditions and their reconciliation in the common life of the Body of Christ, wherever this can be done without compromising those fundamental truths to depart from which would be apostasy from Christ'. Our separated brethren hold that such reconciliations would be the healing of schisms within the Church; we, that the only reconciliation that can finally heal the divisions of Christendom is the drawing of its separated traditions into the already existing unity of the Church, which cannot be divided because Christ himself is the guarantee of its unity. Yet both they and we can have that deep and sacrificial love which makes men willing to work to prepare the ground for an end which God alone can bring about. In this lies the essence of the true ecumenical spirit.

How can it be implemented? It can provide a powerful force of prayer. Can it do more? The doctrines that divide us seem quite intractable, and in thirty years the ecumenical movement has done little to make them less so. At the same time, however, it has strengthened the conviction of many Christians of different allegiances that true unity must be ultimately based on doctrinal agreement. Before we can make contact effectively on questions of doctrine it is vitally important to understand each other's beliefs by seeing them in their wholeness; not, as it were, atomically and in isolation, as something to be controverted and so unwittingly caricatured, but as they are in the mind and in the life of those who hold them. To accomplish this, personal contact is needed in the technique of ecumenical discussion, in an atmosphere of friendship, where the idea of controversy of the win-a-victory type is resolutely set aside. The one thing sought for must be to *give* the truth we apprehend, without

² *The Fullness of Christ—the Church's growth into Catholicity*, being a Report presented to His Grace the Archbishop of Canterbury. S.P.C.K., 1950, p. ix.

ulterior motive, in an idiom and language which will bring understanding. In this way we ourselves *receive* truth from a clear understanding of those who differ from us and a deeper sharing of what we hold in common. Even when all this has been done there will still be intractable differences of doctrine, but the ground will be prepared, as it is not now prepared, for the seeds of unity to grow. The psychological barriers separating different traditions, which make a common world of discourse impossible and are even more divisive than our dogmatic differences, will have been penetrated.

What are these psychological barriers which must be surmounted from either side as a first step towards Christian unity? Till lately, Catholics, Anglicans and Free Churchmen have carried on their debate with mutual hostility. The psychological atmosphere has been that of warfare in which one's own side is never wrong and the enemy's always is. Today it is widely felt that we are in fact separated *brethren* standing together for a conception of human life rejected by many around us. Our religious cultures have grown widely apart for several centuries, each preserving its imaginative background of emotional prejudice in regard to the others; each speaking its own language and cultivating its own way of approach and habits of thought. It is peculiarly difficult for Catholics to convey theological ideas to those of other traditions because we have not learned to understand their habit of thought or express ours in their idiom. Our own scholastic idiom is engrained in our habit of thought and we hardly realise how different it is from theirs. Its use without interpretation is like talking to a foreigner who understands some of what we say quite well, but some he misunderstands and some is quite unintelligible to him.

In addition to difficulties of idiom and language there are others which make necessary a certain economy in the discussion of doctrine. What may be termed root doctrines should be the first point of contact; not till these have been dealt with is it prudent to go on to doctrines which spring from those roots and can only be grasped in relation to them. Disagreement about the nature of the Church as constituted by Christ is the ultimate obstacle to Christian unity, but it is

small use to begin by discussing questions of order and organisation. We must first go deeper to the nature of the supernatural and its relation to the natural, and thence to the nature of dogmatic truth, of revelation and of the grace by which such truth is received by men and made effective in their lives; for it is upon our solution of these problems that our belief as to the nature of the Church depends. On our side these themes must be theologically clarified in conferences with theologians of other allegiances, translating them from the Latin thought forms in which we customarily deal with them and relating them to the biblical and patristic concepts in which in our classical theology they are rooted. Only so can any synthesis be sought for between our scholastic medium and the biblical approach of scholars of the Anglican and Free Church traditions. Until a beginning is made here there is little hope of any fruitful contact between ourselves and our separated brethren. The roots of the tree must be attended to before any fruit can be expected from it.

In this work of ecumenical discussion the Church of England has a special role to play. It is, as a recent writer on ecumenical problems has remarked,³ itself the embodiment of the ecumenical dilemma. When all the psychological barriers have been removed, and doctrinal divergences are clearly demarcated and seen in their true perspective, Christendom will still be confronted with the final question—Catholic Church or Reformation? The Church of England is unique among the non-Catholic Churches in this, that its conscious judgment has always been and continues to be held in suspension in face of this dilemma. On one side it inclines to the Catholic and on the other to the Protestant conception of the nature of the Church, and though its different elements share to a remarkable extent a common ethos, on this fundamental issue they stand opposed. The Church of England ‘appreciates and ponders over this dilemma as does no other part of Christendom’.⁴ Its marked Catholic and Protestant affinities, combined in a single religious allegiance, are the means of bringing into contact the Eastern Ortho-

³ *The Christian Dilemma*. By W. H. van de Pol, D.D. Dent, 1952, p. 189.

⁴ *ibid.*, p. 189.

dox and Old Catholic Churches on the one hand and World Protestantism on the other. During the past thirty years there has been a pronounced increase, among Protestants, in the understanding and practice of a sacramentalism markedly Catholic in spirit and tendency. This has been due, amongst other factors, to the mediating influence of the Anglican Church. A Catholic ecumenism will find it wise to seek contact first with the Church of England and in particular with its Anglo-Catholic wing; from there its influence would permeate to the Evangelical group and thence to the Free Churches.

Two examples will perhaps serve to illustrate the need for such contact in discussion as we have advocated. A well-known controversial work has lately been reissued in an abridged edition: Salmon's *Infallibility of the Church*,⁵ originally published with special reference to the decrees of the Vatican Council. Salmon was a learned Anglican of his time, Regius Professor of Divinity in Trinity College, Dublin. The book is a massively conceived and closely argued attack on infallibility of any kind in the transmission of God's revelation to men. Though it certainly contains inaccuracies and logical gaps it cannot be answered merely by picking holes in its history or logic. The real answer to it lies in the fact that Salmon goes far astray theologically in his conceptions of the nature of infallibility of tradition and of faith, as classical Catholic theology understands them. These conceptions necessarily determine the nature of his argument, much of which is vitiated in consequence by the faultiness of its foundations. Yet the book has been hailed in responsible Anglican circles, and elsewhere, and is now again so hailed, as an unanswerable demolition of the Roman claims.⁶

Another interesting example occurs in the report of a group of Free Church theologians presented to the Arch-

⁵ *The Infallibility of the Church*. By George Salmon, D.D., abridged and edited by H. F. Woodhouse, B.D. John Murray, 1952.

⁶ *vide Retrospect of an Unimportant Life*, Vol. III. By H. Hensley Henson. p. 153.

bishop of Canterbury.⁷ In the course of an exposition of the doctrine of Justification by Faith this report treats of the antithesis (that is the term used) between nature and grace in scholastic theology, and the meaning of the axiom *gratia perficit naturam*. It is implied that the supernatural is represented in the scholastic tradition as a kind of layer of *being* superimposed on nature, but not penetrating it or transforming it, and so, as it were, merely supplementing it, by taking over when it has reached the limit of its inherent powers. This can only be described as an unwitting caricature of classical Catholic theology. The learned biblical theologians who drew up the report appear not to have had access to the primary sources of scholastic theology or to have wrestled unaided in them with the subtleties of this fundamental theme, which has so important a bearing on the doctrine of Justification.

Luther's doctrine, it would appear, fares no better at the hands of an Anglo-Catholic theologian than does ours at those of the Free Churchmen. Dealing with Justification by Faith only in the course of a pamphlet on Anglican Orders, the late Dom Gregory Dix wrote some characteristically vivid pages,⁸ which, judged by the standards of the usual Catholic apologetic, are accurate and telling. Yet *The Catholicity of Protestantism* calls these same pages a monstrous travesty of Protestant teaching⁹ and gives a very different picture of Luther's doctrine. It will be recalled that Newman's *Lectures on Justification*¹⁰ were written to show that the differences between Catholic and Protestant doctrine on this subject are largely verbal. In 1874 he reissued these lectures with explanatory notes, and in the advertisement he says that unless he held in substance now what he published

⁷ *The Catholicity of Protestantism, being a Report presented to His Grace the Archbishop of Canterbury by a group of Free Churchmen*. Lutterworth Press, 1950. p. 52.

⁸ *The Question of Anglican Orders*. By Dom Gregory Dix. Dacre Press. pp. 21-24.

⁹ p. 79.

¹⁰ *Lectures on the Doctrine of Justification*. By John Henry Newman. 5th Ed. Longmans.

in 1838 he would not at this time be reprinting what he wrote as an Anglican.

If there can be misconceptions so striking, and of such long duration, by one side of the basic doctrine of the other, it is clearly necessary that every opportunity should be seized of getting at the truth. The means to this end is personal discussion, at a deep theological level, between Catholic scholars and those of the Church of England and the Free Churches. Opportunities are not lacking, nor is goodwill. In the recent *Instruction* of the Holy Office all diocesans are given a mandate for such meetings, and they are charged to see that competent theologians take part in them. What is needed is the slow and patient work of preparing the ground, creating a common background of thought, in which the fullness of truth can take root. Of course Catholics are convinced that if the unity of Christendom is ever realised it will be on the basis of what their own Church lays down as essential; Anglicans too will believe that a reunited Church can only require what they themselves hold necessary, and that it must require that; while Free Churchmen envisage the 'coming great Church' as built upon a polity and faith corresponding to their own ideals. Every honest Christian must think in this way if his principles are worth anything. We can all agree that a change of heart is needed, in ourselves no less than in others, but we look for a change of mind in those who disagree with us. We can all agree, too, whatever may be our respective beliefs as to the content of the Faith, that unity in it must ultimately come from the movement of the Holy Spirit changing men's minds. Meanwhile there is much preparatory work to be done, in which all Christians can collaborate, to remove from men's minds prejudices and misunderstandings which are obstacles to that movement.