

Editorial

Looking for signs of the work of the Spirit in the world can be a discouraging business; we get impatient at the lack of immediate results. This is particularly obvious in ecumenical work. We have just completed another octave of prayer for Christian unity: the same goodwill has been expressed, the same general feelings of promise and hope, but on reflection we may wonder whether we have taken a step nearer to the unity we so much desire.

Yet reunion of the Churches is something very different from a merger of companies in the City, too much perhaps the model we subconsciously adopt. All that is needed there is for the bosses to get together and decide terms which can then simply be put to the shareholders. The Church, however, is an organic community, and will not take a step of this kind before every member is prepared and ready. Change of heart is a slow business, even when the Spirit is bringing it about; the Spirit has to be heard before we can be sure where he is asking us to go.

Can Rome change? There is a good deal of point to the anxious question so often put by the Christian world. Yet it is obvious enough that Rome is ever changing: the Church of the first century is not that of the fourth, the fourteenth, the twentieth. Of course at the same time the Church is unchanging, for the foundation on which she is built is Jesus Christ, the same yesterday, today and for ever. The Church is indeed possessed by the truth which is in Christ, yet it is only by hearing the Spirit of truth that she learns slowly through history how to express it. The truth is one, but as Christians, we have not yet learned how to take hold of it fully. When we have all reached it we shall be united, not by an artificial merger but through organic growth.

Here lies the immediate importance of the ecumenical movement for us. We shall always keep the final goal in view: but we need not be too worried if it never seems to get much nearer. The very seeking it has an effect. No Christian body could ever compromise over what in conscience they believed to be the revelation of Jesus Christ; that is the first principle of ecumenism. At the same time discussion with those who think differently is an excellent way to make clear to ourselves just how we do understand that revelation. At the highest level this is something the Church has long been doing: the theological preparation

for renewal and reform in the Council meant ecumenical discussion of every kind. But it is now up to ordinary Christians to enter as fully as they can into the spirit of renewal: how better than by discussion with their neighbours of other allegiance than their own?

We Catholics in England have not as yet made the fullest use of our situation, in close contact with members of the Church of England, unique among the reformed Churches in character and tradition. We hardly realise how anxiously the rest of Christendom has looked to us; or with what enthusiasm they greeted the promise of Archbishop Heenan, in the last session of the Council, that 'in the name of the whole hierarchy of England and Wales, we readily declare our intention of doing everything, short of denying our faith, to bring about the union of Christians. We wish to undertake a fuller and more frequent dialogue with all Christians, of whatever denomination'.

How are we to follow this magnificent lead? Not necessarily by great public meetings; rather by discussion with our own friends in our own homes. We meet every day as citizens: we have now to learn to meet as Christians too. The pattern of discussion cannot be laid down in advance—we have to work it out for ourselves, with the help of our parish clergy. But an essential element will be the prayerful reading of scripture, and this will naturally turn into thinking together about its meaning, not in a polemical spirit, but in a shared search for truth. We have different traditions, different approaches, almost a different language; we must each learn to respect them, to take as well as give. When this is taking place in every parish, unity will be a real possibility; yet more important, our Christian lives, the life of the Church, will have been made new.