

OBSTACLES TO CHRISTIAN UNITY¹

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"A penny for the guy, please mister". I never give small boys anything when they come out on the streets at the beginning of November every year, with the effigies of Guy Fawkes which they should be burning this evening. "Sorry", I say, "but I am a Roman Catholic". I like waiting for the look of pure astonishment that comes over their faces, as if *that* were a reason for not giving them a penny for the guy.

When the Chaplain invited me to address you this evening he suggested that I might take the opportunity to reflect on the obstacles that Roman Catholics in England see as still blocking the way to union with the Church of England. So much rapprochement has taken place, particularly since the Anglican/Roman Catholic International Commission which has since produced three remarkable "Agreed Statements" testifying to convergence, if not perhaps consensus, on traditionally controversial issues. These Agreements seem to warrant some movement towards full, visible, eucharistic communion between Rome and Canterbury. This growing together has been achieved in a variety of ways, at many different levels. The most significant movements have been in a phrase or gesture. On 25th October 1970, during his sermon at the canonization of forty Catholics of England and Wales who died for their faith during the penal days, Pope Paul referred to the Anglican Church as the "ever beloved Sister" of the Roman Catholic Church. Italian rhetoric, you may say; but I don't think so. Such a change of idiom from previous references to the submission of a wayward daughter to her patiently waiting mother cannot be unconsidered. It marks a great change in Rome's attitude to Canterbury. And the presence at the inaugural Mass in St Peter's Square of Pope John Paul II, on 22 October 1978, of the Archbishop of Canterbury, is another sign of the reconciliation that is taking place between the Church of England and those of us who are in communion with the Church of Rome.

And yet, of course, obstacles remain. There continue to be doctrinal and theological difficulties between us. These difficulties

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are felt by Anglicans as much as by Catholics. The Open Letter addressed by a group of Evangelical Churchmen to the bishops of the Anglican Communion in July 1977 reveals the sense that some members of the Church of England have that the real problems in the way of full communion between Canterbury and Rome have not yet even been discussed. Besides, any Anglican who thinks that all the difficulties are disappearing should remind himself that we have not yet settled, in the Roman communion, the rights and wrongs of certain methods of contraception in marriage. Again, we are by no means clear about the extent of the claims that we have made for centuries about the authority of the pope in the Church; many Catholics still hold ultramontanist views which surely frighten many Anglicans. Again, we have a deep and lively devotion to the Blessed Virgin Mary which is by no means shared with or even palatable to Anglicans of my acquaintance. And finally, as to the question of the admission of women to the order of priests or bishops, I am certain that, whatever the open-mindedness on the matter of many of our theologians and some bishops, no bishop in communion with the see of Rome is going to proceed to ordain a woman until such an alteration in ecclesiastical discipline has been authorized by an ecumenical council – by which I mean a council at which the Orthodox would be present. The Church of Rome now cares so deeply about the restoration of full communion with the Orthodox that I cannot see any decision to ordain women without the consent of a council of the reunited Church. If you say that is putting the question off for fifty years – well, so be it; it may be putting it off for a thousand years.

But it was not to discuss difficulties that Anglicans must still have about union with Rome that I came here this evening. I mention them, first to make it clear that I know that they exist, but also because I think they are more formidable than some Anglicans seem to imagine. My brief, however, is rather to expound the difficulties on our side: the hesitations, suspicions, fears, that we still sometimes have, when we contemplate the prospect of communion between Canterbury and Rome, Lambeth Palace and Archbishop's House, Westminster.

In the first place, many of us are nervous about the soundness of Anglican doctrine. A book like *The Myth of God Incarnate* undoubtedly helps to 'confirm many of us, and especially many of our clergy, in our suspicion that Anglicans are not to be trusted even on the most fundamental doctrines of Christian faith. We have among us, even in Germany and the Netherlands, no single theologian of equivalent stature, and certainly no group of theologians, so "radical" that they could produce a book like *The Myth of God Incarnate*. Again, a book like *Christian Believing*, the report of the Doctrine Commission of the Church of England and thus an altogether weightier document, although it contains much

that many of us find instructive and illuminating, yet raises questions about the famous “comprehensiveness” of Anglican doctrine: is, in the end, anything and everything within the limits of the acceptable? Equally important, I think, is the Open Letter which I have already mentioned: these Anglicans put so much stress on the Protestant Calvinist streak that many of us, on our side, wonder exactly what we should be taking on, if there was to be union between us now.

On the other hand, I must confess that, for myself, it was with relief that I read the Evangelicals’ insistence, in the Open Letter, that “whatever isolated individuals, even archbishops may say, union with Rome is not at present under discussion, nor can be” Relief—because while I certainly welcome the rapprochement between us that I have described (the ARCIC agreements, the exchange of fraternal courtesies between our respective church leaders, the growth in local ecumenical collaboration, patchy as it is), after all, as a member of the Order to which Vincent McNabb and Henry St John belonged I could not but welcome the rapprochement for which they worked and suffered—there is for all that, something in me that sighs with relief when I find that these Evangelical Anglicans hope that union between us will not come in our time. Give us time, I want to say: give them time too, since they obviously need it; but give Roman Catholics in England, clergy and people, time to assimilate what has happened. Above all, give us time to discover what we *feel* about the Church of England, not just what we *think*.

On his return from Rome Dr Coggan was reported as saying that some anti-Catholic prejudice still exists in England. However that may be, it seems to me that a great deal of very deep-seated suspicion of the Church of England is to be found in the hearts and minds of many Roman Catholics in this country—a gut reaction of profound distrust. *In this country*—I stress *that*; many Catholics from elsewhere, and some ecumenists, entirely fail to reckon with the feelings of the mass of English Catholics—because it is feelings, ancestral memories, prejudices, emotional and irrational factors if you will, that constitute by far the greatest obstacle to our rapprochement with Anglicanism. The ecumenism at the level of what we *think* must be accompanied now by an irenic exploration of what we *feel*—and your inviting me to treat this subject at evensong in John Henry Newman’s old college already shows the trust there is between us, making it possible for me to be so frank, and placing the discussion inevitably in the shadow of a man who felt most acutely the problem that I raise.

Sometimes our reactions are plainly irrational. A certain lingering sense of being a persecuted minority can make us nervously aggressive. The attack by the Archbishop of Glasgow on the heir to the throne’s soggily latitudinarian remarks to the Salvation

Army, taking them as retaliation against the pope for refusing to let Prince Michael marry in a Catholic Church, seemed shrill. We have a strong sense of being a beleaguered minority surrounded by an establishment that patronizes us. It is irrational to some degree because, as all the statistics show, there are as many church-going and active members of our flock, Sunday after Sunday, as there are in the Church of England or for that matter in the Church of Scotland. I should say that I am myself from the north-east of Scotland, of Episcopalian descent on my father's side, of recently lapsed Catholics and old-fashioned Victorian freethinkers on my mother's side. Union between Scottish Episcopalians and the Catholic Church would mean something quite different from union between English Catholics and the Church of England. If I were an Episcopalian, particularly in Glasgow, I should be trembling at the prospect of being embraced in union with Rome!

But numbers have little to do with it. The problem is that the Church of England is the "establishment", and the English Catholic community (as John Bossy, among others, has put beyond dispute) is profoundly dissenting and nonconformist in spirit. Deep down, pervasively, in ways it is very hard to define, we remain, on the whole, suspicious of what we regard as the entanglement of the Church of England with the Crown – and that means, in the end, with a certain class in the social structure of this country. The residual "Erastianism" of Anglicans, now more a matter of ethos and spirit than of law, constitutes the greatest single obstacle to most English Catholics, and thus the greatest single challenge to our advance in ecumenical dialogue.

We have to deal with myths as well as with history. As English Catholics come to understand their own history they will be released from the grip of certain myths. But there are also the memories of hard facts. The English Catholic community had attained a fair level of modest prosperity by the second half of the eighteenth century: it had learned to come to terms, in an irenic spirit but with much wit and government collusion, with the increasingly obsolete penal laws. There seemed every prospect of a gradual dismantling of the disability laws and the slow return of Catholics to normal public life. There were some 80,000 Catholics in England in 1770; by 1850 there were about 750,000. The indigenous English Catholic community's expectation of gradual progress towards full emancipation and of continued stability were completely altered by the need of English industry for Irish labourers (from about 1770 onwards) and by the news from Dublin that Ireland was becoming (as they say) "ungovernable".

It proved necessary, for the security of Britain, to bring Ireland under direct rule from Westminster. The rising in 1798, in sympathy with the French Revolution, however misjudged and unwelcome to most Irishmen, frightened the British Government.

The solution was legislative union between Ireland and Britain, enacted in 1800, with effect on the first day of 1801. From then onwards the quiet movement towards emancipation which English Catholics had been conducting for nearly twenty years suddenly became inextricable from the Irish Question. In the end, as Derek Holmes says (*More Roman than Rome*, page 38), Irish demands for Catholic Emancipation became so involved with popular democratic claims that "in order to avoid rebellion, to restore law and order, and to remove the threat to the Tory Government, Wellington and Peel decided to introduce a Relief Bill". Thus, in 1829, partly as a result of the patient activity of English Catholics but mainly because of the British Government's fear of Irish Catholics as a "security risk", the Bill for Catholic Emancipation was finally passed. On the whole, indigenous English Catholics probably regretted the "Irish dimension"; but from that point onwards, increasingly as the nineteenth century advanced, the Catholic community in England had to absorb a very large number of immigrants from Ireland – people who had suffered from the British in Ireland, people who were despised as riffraff in the great Victorian urban industrial centres (the object of racial hatred), people who had every reason to fear the British establishment: the Government, the Queen and the Church of England. If the indigenous English Catholics had settled for a certain dissenting independence, by the middle of the nineteenth century they were swamped by immigrants from Ireland, half of whom lapsed from the faith and many of whom were in any case Protestant (it is estimated that a third of the population of Ireland were Protestant by 1800), but all of whom contributed to the prejudice against the British State and its Church. While the interests of indigenous English Catholics, and of Catholics of Irish extraction settled in England, have continued to be different from Irish interests, so that it is not difficult to find embarrassment about, and even hostility towards, the Irish and their problems with the British Government today, the ambivalent feelings on the part of many English Catholics draw them in the end to keep their distance from the "Establishment". And the Established Church is identified, at this level of feeling, with the British "Establishment". This was never more obvious than in the spontaneous reactions of many Catholics at the television broadcast of the Queen's Jubilee service in St Paul's Cathedral.

In this country, Roman Catholics are, in ethos and ancestral memory, still as recusant, nonconformist and dissenting as they once were in law: quite unlike our brethren in many other parts of Europe, which is why they find us so difficult to understand.

And there *is* Guy Fawkes. Born in York in 1570, he was baptised and brought up as an Anglican. His father was a proctor of the ecclesiastical courts and advocate of the consistory court of

the archbishop of York. His father died when he was barely nine years old and his mother remarried when he was about sixteen. His stepfather's mother was a Vavasour of Weston, and the family moved into recusant circles. By the time that he came of age Guy Fawkes was a zealous Catholic. He enlisted as a soldier of fortune in the Spanish army in Flanders when he was twenty-three, nothing unusual for a young gentleman at the time. He entered history when he became involved in the Gunpowder Plot. About midnight on 4th November 1605 he was arrested at the door of a cellar under the Houses of Parliament by a search party who knew whom and what they were looking for, because the conspiracy had been betrayed (indeed Robert Catesby, the ringleader, carried on even though he knew that). Faced with King James in his bedroom in the early hours of the morning Guy Fawkes said that one of his objects had been "to blow the Scots back to Scotland". But after being tortured he began to name names and although he pleaded not guilty at his trial he was condemned on the strength of the confession he had made.

There was of course a plot. In 1604 a bill was introduced into Parliament classing Catholics with forgers, perjurers and outlaws, and disabling them from sitting in Parliament. Any attempt to receive Catholic education abroad rendered the culprit incapable of inheriting property. All priests were ordered to leave the kingdom. The penal laws were beginning to bite. The Catholic gentry grew desperate. But the interesting feature of this incompetent conspiracy of some minor Catholic gentry is how skilfully it was used to discredit and inculpate as many priests of the Society of Jesus as possible. For (as Godfrey Anstruther has noted) anyone with the patience to read through the two folio volumes of miscellaneous manuscripts known as the "Gunpowder Plot Book" will find little reference to gunpowder and not much more to the plot; most of the documents are about papists and masses.

On 3rd May 1606 Father Henry Garnet, superior for the previous twenty years of the Jesuit missionaries in England, was executed. At most he knew of the plot, his crime might have been failing to reveal it to the government. But his name had always been the first in the list of conspirators wanted by Salisbury's men. It is the hunting down of priests and the proscription of the Mass that Catholics have not yet forgotten. Our difficulty, to be frank, is that we cannot absorb the fact that the descendants of the people who stopped our forefathers in the faith from saying Mass really want to be in communion with us now – when we celebrate what we believe is the same Mass.

God knows that Roman Catholics have done terrible things. But my task this evening has been to bring out the obstacles on our side to union with the Church of England. Mainly, then, so it seems to me, the reluctance on the part of many Catholics in this

country to go forward eagerly towards union with Anglicans derives from memories of the Irish Question and memories of the proscription of the Mass. For many of us, the Church of England is identified with the government, the army and the police, by whom so many of our forebears in the Catholic faith, the Irish and the recusants, were so brutally and persistently calumniated and persecuted.

Think of how the Orthodox still feel about the sacking and desecration of Constantinople in the year 1204 – nearly eight hundred years ago. It just takes time for the wounds of such outrages to heal. On a smaller scale, perhaps, than the estrangement between the Orthodox and Rome, there is this gut reaction, on the part of many English Catholics, clergy and laity, this deep distrust and even dislike, of Anglicanism. Time alone can heal this, given the will to admit it and the sympathy to understand. But these *feelings*, prejudices and myths even, if you will, constitute the chief obstacle now, on our side, to better and deeper relations leading to full eucharistic communion with the Church of England. In our deepest selves, there is a stubborn identification with the men and women who stuck to the Catholic faith against all that the power of the State could do to destroy them, here and in Ireland, and for us, alas, the established Church seems inseparable from that State.

Guy Fawkes, for half his short life, was an Anglican. For better and for worse, the English Catholic community owes a great deal to disenchanted sons of the Church of England. There are some who say that the doctrine of papal infallibility is the greatest obstacle to union between our Churches. The man more responsible than any other, apart from Pope Pius IX himself, for the dogma of 1870, was surely Henry Edward Manning, Harrow and Balliol, Archdeacon of Chichester in 1841, Archbishop of Westminster in 1865: the most dominant figure in shaping the English Roman Catholic community as we know it today. But there was another Anglican, John Henry Newman, who first came to Trinity in 1817, and whom you elected an honorary Fellow of the college in 1877. As his influence spreads we may perhaps be able to find in him – a great English Christian, an Evangelical in his early manhood, a leader of the Catholic revival in the Church of England in the prime of his life, a Cardinal of the Church of Rome in his old age – a focus and an inspiration to continue the mission for which he was destined: to clear away, quietly and with determination, anti-Catholic prejudice, but also (as so many of his essays and letters indicate) to free his fellow Roman Catholics from the heavy burden of their past: to free us, so that, please God, we may forgive and be forgiven for the past, to turn to a new future, preaching the Gospel in the name of our common Lord and Saviour, Jesus Christ, to whom be the glory both now and for ever.