

A REUNION MOVEMENT IN GERMANY

ALLUSION has already been made in BLACKFRIARS (January, 1933, p. 10) to a remarkable movement for reunion among a small but learned and influential group of Lutheran pastors and laymen in Germany. Dr. Karl Thieme and his associates have since been reconciled with the Catholic Church. The documents connected with the events which led to their taking this step have recently been published—significantly by a Protestant firm in Switzerland.¹ These documents are of the greatest interest, not only as indicative of some present tendencies in Continental Protestantism and as showing yet another of the manifold roads to Rome, but also as suggesting possibilities and hopes of a corporate reunion in a not remote future which may go far towards healing the divisions precipitated by the Reformation.

The decision to 'return home' to the Catholic Church was announced and explained in the last number of the Evangelical quarterly *Religiöse Besinnung* towards the end of 1933. In an article entitled *Una Sancta Catholica*, Dr. Thieme deplored the spirit of compromise in contemporary Christianity to which, he maintained, the German Evangelical Church had, owing especially to the activities of the 'German Christians,' completely and formally succumbed. The Evangelical tradition of Luther had, owing to a variety of causes, been completely destroyed in such wise that it could not be resuscitated. The pure Word of God could no longer be preached except under the protection of the successors of the apostles, the bishops of the Catholic Church. Protestantism, in short, had come to a parting of the ways: either it must depart from Christianity altogether and repudiate its own history, or it must return to

¹ *Deutsche evangelische Christen auf dem Wege zur katholischen Kirche: Akten und Abhandlungen* von Dr. Karl Thieme. (Verlagsanstalt Neue Brücke, Schlieren-Zürich; 2.80 Swiss Francs.)

the Church from which it had become separated. Only so could it be true to its own tradition and inheritance.

At the same time Dr. Thieme expressed his great distaste of the 'glaring Counter-Reformation façade which hides from many the inner reality of the Church and renders difficult their return to her.' He also expressed his love and devotion to the Evangelical tradition in which he had been brought up: 'the heritage of the Reformation which is entrusted to us may not at any price be repudiated . . . We desire to be taken back, not as by the elder brother, but as the lost son by the Father himself; yet we wish to be able to bring with us and develop the inheritance which has been left us.' He concludes by expressing the hope that some way to corporate reunion may be found in which similar concessions may be made to returning Evangelicals as have been made to Uniat Churches in the East.

The position taken in this article may well seem paradoxical. But a close study of it and of other writings of Dr. Thieme and his friends will suggest that there was truth in the comment of an anti-Christian Nazi writer who wrote: 'The downfall of Protestantism is probable; the devout will choose to take flight in the security of the Roman Church; Thieme sees more clearly than the orthodox Protestants that the liquidation of the Reformation is at hand.'

The article was accompanied by a request to readers to express their feelings on the subject. The answers were sufficiently satisfactory to persuade Dr. Thieme that the matter deserved to be laid before the Catholic authorities.

A letter was drawn up in the name of the pastors and laity concerned to be sent to the Holy Father. It is a memorable document, and one which may prove to be of historical importance. The petitioners first state their earnest desire to obey in all things the commands of Our Lord, and express their conviction that this is no longer possible in the State-enslaved Protestant Church of the Third Reich, which, they say, 'is in irreconcilable contradiction with the spirit of Our Lord Jesus Christ as we meet it in the New Testament and as it has been preserved

in the tradition of unadulterated Lutheranism.' The downfall of the Evangelical Church is irreparable;² only the Apostolic pastoral and teaching office of the Church could have checked it. From this it is proved (the letter continues) that Lutheranism, in stressing the negative aspect of Luther's teaching, has erred in separating itself from the Apostolic authority. 'In saying this, we have by no means forgotten that Luther originally intended a reform *within* the Catholic Church; but to-day we are compelled to recognize that the development of Lutheranism—not without pressure from without—has taken a false road which leads it ever further away from the Church, and has departed from Luther's own intentions of positive reform.' The petitioners then declare that many of their co-religionists are similarly minded, and ask the Pope whether their return to the Church could be facilitated in such a way that 'where whole congregations (*Gemeinde*) together with their parish pastors desire so to return, the pastors may be ordained as priests, or otherwise be appointed as teachers of religion.' They further ask for the greatest possible use of the vernacular in public worship, and for the preservation and development of the 'customs, hymns and ideas which have been inherited by us from our fathers, so that their fruitfulness may be of service to our fellow-citizens far and wide within the realm of Christ the King.' They recall the words of Our Lord, *In my Father's house are many mansions*, and beg to be allowed 'to help to prepare in the one House of the Lord a familiar home for those who, as a result of the four-hundred-year-old schism, have departed from it.' They conclude: 'We are but a few, but we turn ourselves full of trust and confidence to you, Holy Father, since we hope that the reply which we seek of you will oblige other consciences to return to their home. And we know that the Good Shepherd spared no pains to bring home the *one* sheep which was lost.' The letter is significantly dated: 'The 31st of October in

² Dr. Thieme and his friends regard the 'Calvinising' tendencies of Karl Barth and the 'Opposition' clergy with considerable suspicion.

the Holy Year 1933, four hundred and sixteen years after the nailing-up of Luther's theses.'

The letter was presented to the Holy Father on the following November 7th by Cardinal Schulte, Archbishop of Cologne. It might be expected that so unusual a document, containing such novel and revolutionary proposals, would be completely ignored in the conservative circles of the Vatican. Pius XI does not ignore it. He sends to the petitioners his 'special blessing,' and the expression of his 'joyful expectation,' and asks to be informed more precisely of their position and aspirations. For this purpose Cardinal Schulte appointed a commission of theologians to examine the matter.

The report of this commission has now been published. It is a remarkable (though of course unofficial) document, divided into five paragraphs. In the first it is stated that 'there are no obstacles with regard to dogma. The petitioners are in no way followers of the "Pan-Christianism" rejected in the Encyclical on reunion, *Mortalium Animos*; they desire no tampering with or dilution of dogma, but submit themselves clearly and unmistakably to the teaching office of the Church established by Christ. Hence it remains to deal exclusively with disciplinary matters.'

The second paragraph states that the pastors who are unmarried, and who are duly grounded in Catholic theological knowledge, can certainly be ordained as priests. Those who are married, or who for any reason do not wish for ordination, will be able, with full *missio canonica* from their bishops, to address their former congregations as commissioned catechists with real teaching authority.

The third paragraph deals with the question of the use of the vernacular. It is pointed out that the congregational use of the mother-tongue simultaneously with the Latin prayers of the priest 'presents no difficulty whatsoever.'

Fourthly, Lutherans will find that many of their hymns are contained in the Catholic diocesan hymn-books already in use in Germany. 'Consequently, without further ado, the former Lutherans will be able to sing old Lutheran hymns during divine worship.'

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Finally, it is pointed out that the problems arising from the petitioners' wish to continue to occupy themselves with the ideological inheritance of the Reformers and their followers is not a serious one. In practice it will be a problem only for the first generation, and then only for the more learned among them.

It will be seen on examination that the commission proposes nothing very far-reaching or revolutionary. Rather it would show that the aspirations of the petitioners can be satisfied within the elastic framework of the existing Latin communion. But Dr. Thieme does not disguise the fact that he is, in some respects, disappointed with the report. He is convinced that there would be a widespread return of German Evangelicals to the Church if greater regard could be paid to the difficulties which confront them. He looks for a wider application of the 'Uniat principle' for the healing of the schisms of Western Christendom. He believes that considerable concessions and some measure of congregational autonomy could be obtained if the ecclesiastical authorities could be brought to share his conviction that there are great numbers of Protestant Christians who are anxious to become Catholics, but find very grave difficulties in the way of becoming 'absorbed' into the existing Latin congregations with their alien customs and traditions.

It is difficult to say whether his optimistic judgment regarding the extent of the demand for corporate reunion is justified. But it is the opinion of other competent observers that many forces are at work within Protestantism which may lead to a return to Catholicism.³ The present writer has been told that in Norway there are several pastors and congregations desirous of similar corporate reconciliation if circumstances permit.

It must also be noted that influences are also at work among Catholics which would greatly facilitate such re-

³ Cf. Oskar Bauhofer, *Die Evangelische Kirche in der Gegenwart in Die Kirche in der Zeitenwende*. (Bonifatius-Druckerei, G.m.b.H., Paderborn.)

union. The sectarian mentality forced upon them by the position in which they found themselves after the Reformation and Counter-Reformation is being slowly but surely abandoned; without undue complacency we may say that a vigorous spiritual and intellectual renaissance is in progress. The Liturgical Movement and Catholic Action, as Dr. Thieme remarks, are regaining for the laity their full participation in the Church's life, and so preparing a more congenial *milieu* for those who have been brought up in Evangelical traditions. A deeper understanding of our own Theology—and particularly a more spiritual understanding of the Mystery of the Church—together with more objective historical research, is preparing the way for contact and understanding with Christians outside. It is being proved that the way to reunion lies 'in a fuller realization of the implications and applications of Catholic dogma and the more intense living of the full richness of Catholic life.'

That the Holy See, while adopting a thoroughly sympathetic attitude towards the proposals of Dr. Thieme and his friends, has so far pronounced no decisions on the subject will surprise nobody. As Dr. Thieme himself points out, the Holy Father is anxious to avoid giving the impression that he is taking advantage of the unhappy state of the German Evangelical Church for a campaign of proselytism. And there are many features in Dr. Thieme's position which would seem to call for great caution; the movement must stand the test of time. But, as Dr. Thieme says, 'many will ask themselves whether what has already been done is not a pledge of good will . . . which opens up immense perspectives for the future.'

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