

NEARER TO GOD MEANS NEARER TO EACH OTHER

THOMAS SARTORY, O.S.B.

[This article is a translation of *Vom Sinn dieser Tage* ('On the Significance of These Days'), the opening talk by the Editor of *Una Sancta* at the joint retreat for Catholics and Protestants held in July 1957 at the Abbey of Niederaltaich in Lower Bavaria. Seventy people took part in this retreat, exactly half of them Catholic and half Protestant. The Protestants were nearly all Lutheran pastors and theologians. From both the Protestant and the Catholic side the results were wholly positive. Archbishop Lorenz Jaeger, representative of the German Bishops' conference on ecumenical questions, wrote a personal letter of welcome to those who attended the retreat, and afterwards declared that this sort of meeting on a spiritual basis was the most fruitful and promising of all ecumenical work. An Evangelical theologian from Eastern Germany remarked that he had learnt at this retreat that the approach to the interdenominational problem was better made *meditando* than *disputando*. It is planned to hold a similar retreat at Niederaltaich every year, and indeed the second of the series has already taken place.

We print this talk in *THE LIFE OF THE SPIRIT* because it is very instructive for us in England to know about the boldness of some of the ecumenical activities in which Catholics on the Continent are taking part. But the Editor feels that he must make it perfectly plain that he does not necessarily agree with everything Pater Sartory says. The very special context in which the talk was given must be borne in mind, but even so the Editor considers that much of what follows would need thorough elucidation before it could be wholly acceptable.]

MAY I begin by welcoming you to the *Haus der Begegnung* (meeting house) and to the Abbey of Niederaltaich. We have come together for a singular enterprise, and as far as I know nothing of the sort has taken place before since Christendom became divided. We, Protestant and Catholic Christians, are to spend these days of spiritual retreat *together*

Regarding reunion, nothing could be further from the spirit of Niederaltaich than any expectation of patent solutions. We do not

much care for over-simplified and smooth *formulae*. But we do know this; it is certainly not contentious thought, nor is it even only strenuous intellectual effort that will heal the wounded Body of Christ. The forces conducive to reunion lie deeper, and must be sought on the level of a *spiritual growing towards one another*. And this coming nearer together in spirit should surely be well served by these coming days of shared retreat.

In my letter of invitation I told the story of the Abbot whose monks asked him how they were to reach spiritual unity when they were all so different from one another in background and character. The Abbot replied by showing them a wheel, the hub at the centre, the rim at the circumference. Two points which may lie far apart on the rim, he said, come nearer together the more they follow the direction of the spokes which run from the rim to the hub. 'In the measure in which you come nearer to God you will draw nearer to each other too. But the more you fall a prey to the world, the further apart you will grow.'

Days of spiritual retreat; that means days of listening to what God says to us and wants of us. I invited you here confidently hoping that you would bring with you *hearts ready to listen with*. We do not expect to emerge from this retreat re-united; the doctrinal differences are too great, they are, humanly speaking, unbridgeable. But we do know that we have been given much in common. We have a whole treasury of truth which we share, and we hold it too on one another's behalf. That is what is consoling nowadays; more and more we witness how God's grace triumphs even over the sin of our separation, in that God's Holy Spirit is at work on both sides. We are separated by differences of faith, as regards the things *de quibus creditur*, as the theologians say; but there is a faith that may unite us too, the faith *qua creditur*. Faith, hope, and love, are what we Christians have in common. But perhaps the Protestant Christian believes, hopes and loves otherwise than the Catholic? The coming days will show to what extent we mean the same by these things; the form in which faith hope and love are known to each of us will become clearer through the elucidations of our respective spiritual fathers. I think we can say outright that a Catholic has a different experience of faith from a Protestant. On this point there are sure to be a number of differences which it is extremely difficult to tie down, owing to the fact that even within one's own ranks not everything

can be reduced to one common denominator. For instance, the spirituality of a Benedictine is not the same as that of a Franciscan or a Jesuit. Devotional practices current in Germany are not the ones familiar to the Spanish or the South Americans. But nobody would dream of claiming priority for one or the other. In fact we may ask whether it is not precisely these differences in the practice of our faith that unite us, each stressing different aspect of faith and hope and love in a way unfamiliar to the other traditions. Where faith is concerned, the variety of our experience unites us, to our mutual gain, in the practice of our living faith. That is why, during our retreat, we want to listen not only to God but to our brethren too. It is often said of separated Christians that they have a disastrous habit of talking different languages. But this is not without its wholesome aspect, for on hearing the Gospel read in an unwonted tongue, we may be shaken out of our ruts, if only because of the necessity of coming to terms with the new form, and asking ourselves: 'Is it or is it not *the* gospel?'

So listening should certainly be given priority during this retreat. We shall be attentive with the ear of the heart, as St Benedict said. This is not easy. For we all come from the tumultuous world where the many words easily drown the one essential word. Our minds are filled with the kaleidoscope of the world, and it is hard to keep our eyes clear for the essential thing. Now is a chance to learn afresh how to listen and how to see. For this, *inward and outward silence* are a *sine qua non*. So I would ask you kindly to give silence its place and to observe it specially from Compline each evening till morning service next day, and in all the passages and public rooms except the dining room. Of course discussion among us separated Christians is most necessary, and no doubt there will be many conversations. But let us allow our conversation to arise out of our silence, and only occur when we have listened intently with the ears of the heart . . .

I think it is not without significance that we place our acts of worship at the centre of our retreat. It is where the transition from abstract to concrete, from ideas to life, takes place. Some little time ago a Protestant theologian told of how he once visited the Orthodox Metropolitan Anastasius in Munich, and asked him to agree to discussions between his priests and Protestant pastors. The Metropolitan gave his consent, but when it came to drawing up questions for consideration, he remarked: 'Tell your clergy that

they should attend our services, for they contain the whole sum of what we have to say in these talks'.

There spoke great wisdom, a wisdom which our own theologians would do well to take to heart. There is a *theologia prima* and a *theologia secunda*, as the Protestant Rudolf Schneider pointed out; 'Many Western theologians wonder why Eastern theologians decline to take part in discussions. But they never refuse to talk about prayer, especially liturgical prayer. Indeed they consider, like Cyril of Jerusalem for instance, that God's reality must first be experienced in the *theologia prima* before we can authentically discuss it. Dogma tells of the saving, life-giving acts of Christ, which include *thanksgiving*. The fact that dogma is given us in the Eucharist (which means thanksgiving) must not be by-passed, or our thinking will be blind and bloodless. Praise and thanksgiving for the whole abundance of the saving acts which our Lord works in us, coming to us in the celebrations of our ceremonies, that is *theologia*, that is the worship of God. God's reality, the active part he takes in our salvation, is not primarily a matter for thought and rational speculation, but for thanksgiving, gratitude for the fact that our life has been saved by the act of God. Thankfulness for God's saving acts, as they are known existentially, is *theologia Prima*; through which alone God's reality is made accessible to mankind. 'He honours me truly who offers me a sacrifice of praise' (Ps. xlix, 23). Praise is the primary means of access to God's reality. So our thinking about God needs to return to thanking, and to nourish itself there, if it is to be real. All *theologia secunda*, inherently dogmatic and doctrinal as it is, must be grounded in *theologia prima*. In the primitive Church the Eucharist was a source of dogma and doctrine, words of prayer turned into dogmatic statements, and the Eucharist formed its own dogma.

Something else is now clear; behind our different ways of speaking about God and salvation lie a great variety of personal experiences. Teresa of Avila must have had a quite exceptional experience of God for the ground theme of her whole mystical theology to emerge in the phrase *Dios solo basta*, 'God alone is enough'. And Martin Luther too must have had his own special experience to formulate as he did his views on law and Gospel and the troubled conscience. The variety of dogmatic assertions is backed by widely differentiated experiences of faith, and these

have to be explored if we want to come together in the field of doctrine too. That is why I think it is quite true to say that discussions between us are better held in a monastery than in a university. A few days ago I read what Erich Przywara has to say about the Reformation: 'Reformation in mid-European history means what it says, it means reform. That is to say, back to the real form, the old original form of Christianity. It emerges in an absolute, which in the great historical reforms before it and alongside of it represented a certain acquisition. The Reformation is thus heir to the Cistercian reform, that of *Deus caritas*, God of the flaming love as opposed to the fossilized letter of the law; heir to the Benedictine reform of Joachim of Flora, that of *Deus Spiritus libertas*, God as spirit and freedom, for the overcoming of all mere externality, through worship in spirit and in truth; heir to the reform of St Francis, that of *Deus paupertas crux*, in contrast to a Church of pomp and splendour; heir to the Dominican reform, that of *Deus Verbum*, God of the Word and its proclamation as opposed to a misunderstood and lifeless liturgy; and finally it is true brother to the Spanish reform of Ignatius of Loyola, Teresa of Avila and John of the Cross, that of *Deus gratia in media desperatione et nocte*, God as sole grace, illuminating souls smitten with despair.'

We prick up our ears at such phrases. And now it is up to us to enquire how far the God of flaming love, God as Spirit and freedom, the God of poverty and the Cross, God of the Word and its proclamation, God as sole grace when pride collapses, is diminished or silent in our contemporary theology; to enquire too how far the Lutheran or Calvinist Reformation isolated and distorted these inherently Christian things.

Now what emerges from all this is that we have bridgeheads across to one another, rising out of the depths of spiritual experience. Bridges can be built in matters of ascetics and spiritual training, but their shape is not yet visible in *theologia secunda*. I am not suggesting that we should stop turning to our own saints for instruction, as we have done hitherto; what Thérèse of Lisieux or P. Caussade or Abbot Chapman taught about God and grace and man is fundamentally Catholic, and at the same time to be found in the foundations of Protestantism. On the other hand the writings of the Reformers ought to be read for their spiritual content. It is hard work, for they wrote unsystematically,

but it is very rewarding, because a genuine attitude to life is revealed; they do not speak in abstractions but quite concretely. In Luther's protest against metaphysics I recognize the protest of a religious man against abstraction. The chief Catholic witness for this kind of protest is Cardinal Newman. He was not a systematic writer either, but his whole endeavour was towards clarifying and ordering reality. His distinction between 'real' and 'notional' penetrated his entire theology. The keyword of his theological thought was 'realization'. We have to make this reality our very own; for Newman there is no such thing as a purely notional attitude, a purely theoretical one.

On this same subject the Orthodox Metropolitan Seraphim also has a word to say: 'Existentialism consists in this, that at the bottom of our view of the world and our conception of life we find, not thought, not the abstract idea, but concrete reality in process of realization. And what we are aiming at is not tranquillity of mind, but precisely this, realization. Here we have a protest against the abstraction of both materialism and idealism as philosophies; a protest against the shaping of our lives according to abstract conceptions. For the Orthodox, religion is not a theoretical or theological system, but really and truly a key to life; a 'theory' only in the Greek meaning of the word, a contemplation of God and at the same time a becoming-God, a *theosis*. This explains why there is in Orthodoxy no coherent system of dogma.' (This is the account of H. von Rautenfeld.)

Three witnesses from three different denominations, Luther, Newman, and Seraphim. One heart-felt concern surely making for a bridge between separated Christians. I think it is now clear why we hold retreats together, and why prayer and public worship take first place.

And now let me say something that will make a fitting conclusion. What can we expect as the outcome of our meeting? As I said earlier on, not reunion. And yet it will be union. You know how deeply we at Niederaltaich feel our debt in ecumenical matters to the late Abbé Couturier. Once, to express the aim of all this work, he coined the phrase, 'Unity as and when the Lord wills'. And as a legacy he left us another term, which must not be misconstrued, but which does say something quite genuine and encouraging; he seized upon the remark of a colleague about a *monastère invisible*. It was Couturier's great discovery to find

among praying souls astonishing vocations, people offering themselves to God for Church unity, and enduring all sorts of trials, even mortal ones, for this cause. P. Villain tells in his biography of Couturier of a document found among his papers labelled 'Lives sacrificed for Christian Unity'. These Couturier considered to be the first martyrs of a new martyrology. And the existence of such a host of sanctified souls was to him a proof that the Holy Ghost was at work, building the 'invisible monastery' of Christian unity. An Anglican lady wrote to one of his colleagues as follows: 'If it is impossible for a visible cloister to exist without obedience to a religious community or order, it is equally impossible for an invisible cloister to live without a fellowship, community, or order of some kind. The order constituted by the invisible monastery of which the Abbé speaks is no other than the order of Jesus Christ Praying. It is with Jesus praying that it has found unity and finds it again and again in the totality of its prayer, and it is the Whole Christ Praying, head and members, in heaven and on earth. This cloister of the Order of Jesus Praying is called invisible, not because it is nebulous and has no precise existence, but on the contrary because it knows no bounds and exists in the concrete as God wills, in a variety of forms of orders, which in their totality are known to him alone. Sometimes it exists in denominational or inter-denominational groups, whose members know one another; sometimes even in visible cloisters which are dedicated to him for the furthering of the "unity he wills by the means he wills"; sometimes in groups of two or three, who are inwardly, and perhaps outwardly gathered together in his name; sometimes in isolated individuals; but always in the Whole Praying Christ in heaven and earth.'

Now I too could produce evidence as to the Order of Jesus Praying, and the *monastère invisible*. I have testimonies which I will make available to you in the course of these days, of whole communities who explicitly vowed to bind themselves and dedicate their life, prayer and sacrifice for Church Unity. They are Catholic, Protestant, and Anglican communities. And in addition there is an incalculable number of individual people praying quietly alone. As you know, it was at Niederaltaich that the custom began of lighting the *Una Sancta* candle on Thursday every week, as the day on which our Lord in his high-priestly prayer (John xvii) prayed for unity; a light to light the way for

people to come together and pray for unity together with our Lord. I have seen the candle burning in many places in Germany, France, Holland, Belgium, Switzerland, Italy, Denmark, Sweden, and England. I have received letters from all over the world, from the Mexican jungle and the primeval forests of South Africa, and from lands behind the Iron Curtain, telling me that the Thursday candle was lit there too. Is it not true evidence of a unity that goes deeper than all divisions? As we said before, all this must not be misinterpreted; the *monastère invisible* is not by any means an *Ecclesia invisibilis*, nor may we console ourselves with the thought that now everything is done that the Lord had in mind when he founded the Church. But we do know that this great mystery of God, the Church, has an invisible side too; and it seems as though the visible reunion of separated Christians may find its starting point on the invisible side of the Church. Indeed, I hope that by the end of this retreat the *monastère invisible* will have gone one more step nearer fulfilment.

May I close with a remark of the Orthodox Metropolitan Plato of Kiev (†1891): 'The partition walls between the Churches do not reach up to heaven'. On this earth boundaries are drawn which for the sake of truth we dare not disregard; but above us, up in heaven, we have immeasurable scope and incalculable opportunities before us. Nearer to God means nearer to each other. Perhaps it is something like travelling by plane; the higher you soar the wider the horizon becomes, and the better you can see and order the things of the earth. From the earth itself they may appear inordinately high or deep or wide, but from above quite otherwise.

So the purpose of these days of retreat for Protestant and Catholic Christians should be to *gain height spiritually*. But the propelling power of this high flying is, be it said once more, prayer and a listening with the ear of the heart, listening to God and to our brother.