

AFTER FOUR HUNDRED YEARS

IT is a characteristic feature of this time of transition in which we are living that the subject of Christian Unity is being discussed almost universally. Catholic and non-Catholic can write of it and proffer suggestions without arousing too serious an outburst of protest. For Methodists and Presbyterians the matter has passed from the stage of discussion to the goal of accomplished fact. Anglicanism with an eye to the future rather than the past is entering a new phase of comprehensiveness by proclaiming itself as a bridge providentially built to span the gulf between Catholicism and Protestantism. Of necessity Catholics remain materially unaffected by the movement, conscious as they are of the complete Unity of the Church in which they are visibly incorporate; nevertheless there remains a wide margin where we can express our views and opinions with regard to Christian Unity and the means of attaining it. Many of us take our views ready-made upon this subject from the Catholic Press, and save ourselves the trouble of thinking any further about it. It is so splendid to be told that we Catholics, standing secure behind the battlements, can look down with happy serenity upon the struggling disorder of warring sects below. If the warring sects cease to struggle, and achieve a formula of unity, what is our reaction? The 'battlement feeling' makes us perhaps uneasy because the non-Catholic bodies are not quite playing the game: they should be continuing the struggle, so that we could happily continue to draw the moral! If we are to form a reasoned and approachable attitude of mind towards the urgent problem of Union, we must eschew the slightest trace of patronage and condescension towards our non-Catholic neighbour, and shun our splendid isolation, as well as withhold our righteous anger when he seems to hurt us: we find ourselves compelled once again to remonstrate a little too often to establish that atmosphere of tranquillity, which is the proper preliminary for friendly discussion.

Without any sacrifice of theological principle or risk of compromise, we can approach the question of Unity with all the sweet reasonableness and delicacy which is to be found in *Après quatre cents ans*,¹ an outstanding book which bears upon the problem, as it is set between Catholic and Calvinistic Protestant in French Switzerland. Its author is His Excellency Mgr. Besson, the Bishop of Lausanne, Geneva and Fribourg.

The book is cast in the form of correspondence between the Abbé Favre, Curé of a village in Canton Vaud, and M. Curchod, the Protestant Pastor. Letters to and from others are incorporated, as the need arises, to expose Catholic doctrine or views upon particular problems or practices. Both Curé and Pastor who share the spiritual ministrations of the village are men of common-sense who sincerely deplore the misunderstanding and separation that divides Catholic from Protestant, so they decide in a friendly and unofficial way to discuss their differences. They are already united in a strong bond of local patriotism as fellow-Vaudois, and with that as a basis they exchange their views with perfect frankness and courtesy. In the Curé's own words: 'Suppose we tried to understand one another, to mark out our respective positions, to fix the points . . . on which we agree, to distinguish the essential from the incidental? Suppose we set out above all to prepare an atmosphere of sympathy and of mutual good will where the *rapprochement* which both of us wish for would be less difficult to attain. When I pushed open the door to go out—the little door beside the sacristy—the sky was filled with stars. A distant bell struck the hour: another replied. The crickets were singing. I forgot to turn the key: I noticed it this morning. Perhaps my special vocation is to open the church, not to close it.'

In Pastor Curchod's reply are these words: 'We are standing on two banks separated by a large ditch, which

¹ *Après quatre cents ans*. M. Besson. (Genève, Librairie Jacquemoud, Corraterie, 20. 9^{me} mille, 4^{me} édition.) The book is excellently produced, the type is pleasing to read, and the many woodcuts of Vaudois churches are finely executed.

many unwittingly take pleasure in deepening day by day. Instead of continuing this work of destruction we must first of all fill up the unhappy gulf. Afterwards, we should still remain separated, but only by the distance between us: a flat surface is easier to cross than a ravine.'

Before long, the Curé's patience is tried by the Comtesse de Villebrune, who represents a class known in France as *catholiques enragées*! She writes: 'Each time we return to Switzerland we are more surprised, I do not hide the fact, at this mixture of religions in the midst of which you and your compatriots seem to feel at your ease. How is it that you do nothing about converting all these Protestants? My sister-in-law who is *dans les oeuvres* asks me to tell you that, if you wish, she will send you a stock of pamphlets which point out clearly the weakness of Protestantism and the vices of the Reformers.' The Comtesse deplores the theft of Lausanne Cathedral by the Protestants: 'When will they restore it to the Catholics? I am astonished that you do not lay claim to it with more energy. In your case there are compromises which I, a true-blue royalist, cannot agree to.' The Curé's reply is perfectly courteous, but he denies the theft of 'our Cathedral' by the Protestants: 'If the people of Vaud had remained Catholic, the Cathedral would still be Catholic; since they passed over to the Reformed religion, the Cathedral became Protestant. The reason is that our ancestors, who were ill prepared, did not react with sufficient force to repel the new ideas which were thrust upon them. The clergy, too indifferent and too pre-occupied with their personal comfort, could not recognize the gravity of the danger. The Bishop himself instead of remaining at his post to defend the souls under his charge, bolted!'

As to the pamphlets: 'Publications of this kind seem to me to be useless and often dangerous. Their authors, who are ill informed, lack understanding. The way they speak of what they take to be Protestantism reminds me of the tracts of some of the evangelical *colporteurs* wherein you read that we adore the Blessed Virgin or that the Pope is Anti-Christ. Objectively, perhaps, each is not equally valid,

but in each case the result is the same. Six of one and half-a-dozen of t'other!

We all wish for the return to religious unity, but we must use other means of finding it. To say "We have the truth, others are mistaken: therefore it is sufficient to make the truth known, in order to get those who are mistaken to open their eyes to it immediately" is simply childish. Doubtless we must speak out, especially when we are in the presence of good folk who have a mistaken idea of Catholicism; but controversy, even of the most solid kind, is not always seasonable. As to sharp and ill-natured polemic, it has never produced any good whatsoever.'

Point by point, Catholic doctrine is reviewed and presented with straightforward simplicity and no trace of talking down to the non-Catholic. Re-union, by the methods of the Lausanne Conference, is fully discussed, and the Catholic reasons for disagreement and non-participation made quite clear. The Curé, too, shows a surprisingly exact knowledge of Anglicanism and its different schools of thought.

A student at the Seminary receives this sound advice: 'If you wish to contribute to the salvation of the world, you must know what the world is, and therefore take an interest in it. May your horizon never be limited by a sacristy wall or a chapel belfry. If we are attached to ecclesiastical questions alone, if we remain insensible to what preoccupies our contemporaries in the economic and social order, if we abstract ourselves from the contingencies in the midst of which God has called us to live, we shall end by I know not what ill-conditioned, pretentious and exasperating kind of clericalism! . . . What harm the complete separation of spiritual and temporal has done in Catholic countries! . . . You will prepare yourself, not by practising polemics (it is rarely of use), but in steeping yourself in the spirit of the Gospel: it is on the Gospel that our fathers separated; it is by the Gospel that we shall be united.'

Converts enter into the correspondence—the Curé has only received about half a dozen—simply to show that in one case the Protestant parents live in tranquillity with

their Catholic son, once they discover that he remains a normal and decent member of the household, with a keener sense of his duties to father and mother.

The Curé is at his ablest in writing to a fellow-priest upon the Reformation: there is here a frank admission of Catholic shortcomings and a respect for Protestant sincerity. 'The official accounts of the pastoral visitations carried out in the diocese some decades of years before paint a very gloomy picture of the situation: we have no difficulty in admitting it, for there is no humiliation in telling the truth as you see it. At that period religious life here was certainly not what it should have been . . . don't let us try and justify everything . . . let us put on one side the childish descriptions which certain of our adversaries have given of the times preceding the Reformation, blackening the picture as they please: but let us recognize too quite loyally the unhappy religious state of our country at the gloomy hour when unity was broken.' The Curé would be happy in reading the Abbé Constant's work on the Reformation.

There are strong words for what is called *toute une végétation de dévotionnettes*, 'of which no one is indispensable and several are, to say the least of it, puerile . . . In *milieux* where Catholicism is unknown, many good souls who misunderstand these devotions are scandalized at them, and are consequently estranged when they would like to approach us.'

The good Curé prevents an angry reply to an anti-Catholic article which he calls *parfaitement idiot* . . . 'Let us not react every time . . . When rights are violated, above all, rights of conscience, we must protest energetically: but in this case we are only dealing with malicious trifles . . . How many times do we not have to regret that second-rate Catholic journals, above all in certain countries, have no idea how to abstain from disagreeable words and from commentaries utterly lacking in good feeling towards Protestants! If we were without sin in this domain as in many others we could the more freely cast the stone at our neigh-

bours.' Shadows of walled-up religious in twentieth century Spain! But in this country comment is needless.

In a letter to a nun there is the same insistence upon unity as an ideal to be worked and prayed for: 'the return to unity is not a purely human work, we must beg the divine mercy for it. I would like you to ask Him for it, associating yourself with your Sisters to obtain it, and making all your prayers and all your sacrifices a holocaust offered for this purpose. Note, Sister, I do not say, pray for the conversion of Protestants: this term gives rise to confusion . . . To be converted is to turn to God after having lived far away from Him . . . I can't believe that a bad Catholic who does not fulfil his duties would be nearer to God than a Protestant in good faith, who faithfully follows his religion. We must pray for the conversion of both, so that Catholics and Protestants alike, responding to the Inspirations of Grace, should receive, in their complete integrity, the Good Tidings of Salvation which Christ has made known to the world. All will then profess the same Doctrine, have the same Sacraments, obey the same Head, and will be animated by the same Spirit. That will be the true Unity: a single Shepherd, a single Flock.'

These quotations given at length do more to show the spirit of this magnificent book than any commentary or words of praise which would be presumptuous in view of its author's Sacred Office. The difference of locality and nation is accidental in relation to the substantial purpose of the book. Although the lines of separation are sharper and the contrast greater between Catholic and Protestant in Switzerland where local patriotism is a still healthy reality, the problem for us in England is of the same character, and the spirit of our approach to it is here for all to read and to learn. Catholics who work and pray to end the unhappy divisions of Christendom must read this book: so too must those outside the visible unity of the Church if they would receive the most sympathetic as well as the most just contribution from the Catholic side that has yet been published.

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