

Fellowship at Philadelphia

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The following interview took place at an Ecumenical Meeting held in Philadelphia during December. The participants in this dynamic dialogue are the Rev. Clarence Lee, Professor of Church History at the Lutheran Theological Seminary in Germantown, Pennsylvania, and Rev. Arthur Crabtree, Professor of Systematic Theology at the Eastern Baptist Seminary in Philadelphia.

Why Ecumenism? Within the Christian community and even from non-Christian sources, people have challenged the validity of the Ecumenical Movement. Is the Ecumenical Movement merely a pragmatic defense against the forces of materialism, communism and atheism?

Dr. Crabtree: There is some truth in what you say. I think to some extent the anti-Christian attitude of people has thrown Christians more closely together. The dialogue between Catholics and Protestants began in Germany, and to some extent in France, in the concentration camps. Christians were thrown together and they discovered that they were nevertheless Christian brothers. I think there is an actual growth of the Ecumenical Movement within the Christian Churches. It is not simply due to pressure from without, it is also due to a recognition of the importance of unity from within the Christian Church due mainly to the prompting of the Holy Spirit.

Dr. Lee: I agree with Dr. Crabtree's analysis, but I would add that, in the face of rising secularism and a decided opposition to the Church in certain quarters, we have discovered that our greatest enemy is outside the Church and that we can present a common front—a common witness—against the enemies of Christianity. We need no longer waste our energies fighting each other.

Can there be Ecumenism between Catholics and Protestants? The traditional Catholic position maintains that

there is only one true Church—the Catholic Church, while the traditional Protestant position holds for a diversity of Churches.

Dr. Crabtree: I think this is a stumbling block which is passing away. The Second Vatican Council in some of the documents, such as the one on Ecumenism, does not say there is only one Church—they even call Protestant groups Churches or Ecclesial Communities. Protestants are feeling very happy about this for they feel that they are at last being recognized not simply as individual Christians but as Churches. This is forming a new basis for Ecumenical discussion.

Dr. Lee: This is true that the Catholic position with respect to the Catholic Church being the only true Church is changing and I think we can hopefully await further changes along this line. However, it should be pointed out that Protestantism, or perhaps I should say Lutheranism here, also believes there is only one true Church, the Church of Jesus Christ, and we believe no Church has a monopoly on its identification with this one true Church. I think the future of Ecumenism would be for all Churches to recognize their common participation in the one true Church—recognizing that there is one Lord and one Gospel which is proclaimed in the Church. My hope for the Church is a growth into the unity which is already there.

The predominant expression of the Ecumenical Movement so far has been in the area of the dialogue and the sending of representatives to each other's convocations. Can Ecumenism take on additional avenues of manifestation?

Dr. Lee: One very important area which should be opening up more and more all the time would be the area of theological education. I think cooperation, federated faculties, that is, scholars of different traditions—different denominations—participating in the same faculty would make it possible for a theological student to be exposed not to one party line only but to gain an appreciation for the diversity of Church life within the one Church.

Dr. Crabtree: I agree entirely with what Professor Lee says about theological education. I think it is much better and we come much nearer to the ultimate Christian truth and the fullness of this Chris-

tian truth when we study together, rather than separately. This is recognized by Catholics today as well as Protestants—it is in the document on Ecumenism. Another area, and this may be more difficult for Catholics than for Protestants, would be in common worship. We need to become familiar with each other's liturgical inclinations.

Some of the difficulties that divide Protestants and Catholics can not be brushed off as merely semantic difficulties. Before we can participate in common worship, do you think certain doctrinal difficulties—and some quite basic—would first have to be ironed out?

Dr. Crabtree: I would think so. I don't know what you would think Dr. Lee?

Dr. Lee: I would hesitate to assume that the problems which separate us are only semantic problems. It is clear that many of our problems are of a semantic character, but certainly there are some rather deep theological differences which still divide us. We must strive for a frankness in discussing the problems and at least become completely aware of what these differences are. In the past we have tended to imagine what the differences are and this imagining is a very bad thing because it allows us the luxury of opposing people for our own reasons. What we need to find out are the real reasons and concentrate on them. My traditional upbringing and your traditional Catholic upbringing often gave us a negative, if not erroneous, idea of each other's beliefs, while if we read authentic sources we find out what each other truly believes.

What do you project as the ultimate conclusion for the Ecumenical Movement? Will it be an organic unity—truly one shepherd and one fold—or must this objective await the parousia?

Dr. Crabtree: Well, first of all, I think it is the will of God that we should strive for organic unity and with God nothing is impossible. We should desire it as a possibility and a very desirable possibility. We have a long way to go, of course, and we must not expect to reach the goal immediately. There are a lot of steps we have to take, but I think we can be reunited. The Christian Church began as a

unity and I think it can come back into a unity. It will not be the same kind of unity because you can not go back to the same state you were in before.

Dr. Lee: In the early Church there was clearly a unity, but it presented itself as a unity which recognized diversity—there were different theological traditions, different liturgical traditions and different types of Church polity and yet they were able to live together and recognize their common membership in the one Church. However, with respect to any kind of organic union, I would first of all be pessimistic enough to say that I don't see this. Secondly, I would question whether it would be a good thing—to have an organic union in which all Churches would become participants in a monolithic type of ecclesiastical structure—theologically, politically and liturgically. Although you even have within Roman Catholicism a tremendous amount of diversity which I think is part of the genius of the Catholic Church.

Dr. Crabtree: I would say true unity involves organic unity. Unless we get organic union we have only moved partially towards unity because the unity of the Church is the unity of the body of Christ and this body is an organic unity. Many of the pictures of the New Testament speak of the vine—which are also pictures of organic unity. As Professor Lee says, within this unity there is an immense diversity. What we have to avoid is a uniformity—we need a diversity—a unity without uniformity. A living unity is always a unity within diversity.

Seeing that there can be no organic unity at present, can we eventually realize this goal by having each Church undergo changes and mutate to a common ground of unity? The Catholic Church in the Second Vatican Council has attempted to redefine itself in light of the present age and much of Protestantism also finds itself in a period of tremendous transition. Will each group changing lead to a common ground for unity or, perhaps, to further diversity?

Dr. Crabtree: Yes, it can lead to a common ground. It may lead to a greater diversity too, but there is no real opposition between diversity and unity. Real unity is unity within diversity and diversity within unity. But what is really essential (quite a number of Catho-

lic scholars saw this already in the nineteenth century and the Second Vatican Council has also recognized this), is that there can be no real unity unless all of us change somewhat. As we are at present, if all of us remain just as we are, we can not reunite. All of us have to change and become reformed. As we reform and change we can come closer together, but without reform and change we can not do it.

Dr. Lee: This question of whether we can have an organic unity still bothers me. I would have to reassert again that I believe we do have unity. The Church has always had unity in terms of the Lordship of Christ. It seems to me that the Ecumenical problem consists basically in recognizing this unity and growing into a fuller appreciation of the unity that we already possess. This will in turn foster what Dr. Crabtree has said. In recognizing this unity, we will be forced to sacrifice some of the things which we have held to be important but in reality are not as important as we have assumed.

Dr. Crabtree: I would like to mention some of the means that are necessary if we are to achieve unity. We ought to pray much more for unity. This essential step has been emphasized by Couturier and Congar in particular. Congar has also often mentioned the very important principle that all of us need to go back to the sources, not simply to the sources of our denominational traditions, but to the sources of the Christian tradition in the Bible and the Church Fathers. There is a great probability that as we come nearer to the sources of Christianity, we will come much nearer to one another. In this way we will discover that many things in our denominational traditions are really not so important as we thought they were. They need complementation from the insights in other traditions to bring them into the fullness of the New Testament. As each denomination lives an authentic Christian life, they will move closer to Christ—which is the one body. So, in this way, they will be actually working for organic unity whether they planned it or not.