

ECUMENICAL QUEST FOR UNITY

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THE KINGDOM OF HEAVEN is like to leaven, which a woman took and hid in three measures of wheat, until the whole was leavened" (Mt. 13:33). Like leaven: none of Our Lord's parables better expresses the role of the Church in human history. The prolongation of Christ's redemptive mission in His Mystical Body has as its end the utter Christianization of all things—to make all things new in Christ. Far from complete, this work of transformation must go on. Yet how many obstacles seem to loom up in the Church's path! No sooner is one problem solved than another and greater opens up before her. She converted the Roman Empire; only to face the barbarian invasion. She welded the barbaric tribes into that supreme civilization known as Medieval Christendom, had barely finished the task, and then: the Protestant Reformation!

And the Reformation, with millions of souls estranged from the Church's motherly care, with the scandal of religious cleavage and conflict in the very heart of Christendom—the Reformation is still with us. We may take heart, of course, in the knowledge that Christ's Church has ever triumphed and indeed has borne much fruit in overcoming such challenges. Indeed, a glance at history reveals how the Church has profited in many ways from the stimulating impact of Protestantism: martyrs, and more—the great perfecting of her dogmatic position by the Council of Trent and Counter-Reformation theologians; the rise of new religious orders and the revitalizing of old ones; and an apostolic solicitude which has already drawn great numbers back to her fold. Even so, much remains to be done. The end of the present crisis is still far away; it is, in fact, not even in sight.

Within the past few decades, however, divided Christendom has entered a new phase. The Christian conscience simply cannot continue to reconcile the existent religious fragmentation with the explicit words of Christ. In their deep concern, many Protes-

tant leaders have been drawn together in a great religious movement, dedicated to the world-wide unification of all Christian bodies, and known as the Ecumenical Movement. First harbingered in 1910 and furthered by important meetings in 1919, 1925, and 1936, ecumenism took concrete shape after the War, when the World Council of Churches was formed at Amsterdam in 1948.

The Council itself hardly represents that unity which is a mark of Christ's Church. It is not itself a church, and has of itself little authority. It does function, however, as an effective instrument for inter-church cooperation in the practical order—the missions, social concerns and so forth. Far more important, though, is the Council's position as the focus and more concretely the forum and clearing-house of non-Catholic Christianity's quest to recover the seamless garment of religious unity. Most Catholics, unfortunately, have little appreciation of the sincere enthusiasm this movement has awakened in the best minds of non-Catholic Christianity. But as one observer has pointed out:

We must distinguish between the scope of the Council and its hope. Beyond the very limited scope of union as expressly and pithily stated by the constitution, there is present in all participants a strong ecumenical hope which goes far ahead of the constitutional declarations. . . . The goal is a united Christian Church.¹

This hope is echoed outside the Council by the most influential voices of Protestantism: of such representative organs as the *Christian Century* very few issues appear which touch in no way on the ecumenical issue. Yet one of the most important, and most obvious notes evidenced in discussions is the great divergence of viewpoints which the Council embraces—the end-product, we might say, of four centuries of doctrinal anarchy in the name of “private judgment.” Luther's denial of the existence within Christianity of a single authoritative voice was the inevitable forerunner of views ranging from a near-Catholic self-identification with the One visible Church, as professed by Byzantine dissidents and Anglicans, to a notion of the invisible bond of the elect, which hearkens back to Wiclif and the first Reformers. Growing awareness of this fuzziness of purpose was clearly indicated by last summer's meeting of Faith and Order, a partly independent arm of the Council, at Oberlin, Ohio; the problem faced, and not really solved, by the delegates was a basic one: “The Unity We Seek.”

How does the Catholic Church react to Ecumenism? As is well known, she takes no formal part in its gatherings; and this refusal on her part marks the most critical gap in the Council's membership. Even non-Catholics, however, must be aware of the reasons we profess for this stand. In Catholic belief, the "one fold and one shepherd" need not be *sought*, as something yet to be; the *una Sancta* already exists as a visible concrete reality, and it is the Church of Rome. She vindicates in herself the four marks—one, holy, Catholic, and apostolic—and invites all to find at the chair of Peter the unity Christ promised. And woe to her if she preach not this Gospel; the Church would be false to her Founder if she did not proclaim to all who would be saved the obligation of joining her ranks.

Why is it that our non-Catholic brethren who have heard all this before fail to be impressed? May we not reasonably assume that many of those outside the Church "know" our doctrine but that they do *not* know what it *means*. Do not, and generally cannot—upbringing, family loyalty, personal conviction and religious experience—all these factors contribute to a preoccupation with the goodness and beauty and value of their own convictions. It is well for Catholics to remember this in striving to understand why non-Catholics seek religious unity along other avenues than the Appian Way.

Have we reached an impasse, then? The Church taking no part in Protestant moves for reunion; Protestants, in turn, rejecting a union which means submission to Rome. Certainly, the present state of affairs simply does not warrant the impression that we are on the verge of Church union. Yet, today, more than ever before, a zeal and a thirst for the *una Sancta* exists on both sides; and both, in their own way, are hard at work pursuing it. The Church, for her part, has never been completely indifferent to the Ecumenical Movement. From the start the Holy See has attentively followed its development, and has revealed its considered judgment in several important documents, notably Pope Pius XI's encyclical *Mortalium Animos* (January 6, 1928) and the *Instruction of the Holy Office on the Ecumenical Movement*, issued in 1949 just after the formation of the World Council. Both statements affirm and explain the Church's non-participation in the movement; but apart from that their tone is sympathetic and fatherly, yet tempered with a sober caution as to the theological postulates of ecumenism.

The *Instruction* in 1949 described the movement as awakened

"... under the inspiring grace of God . . . a source [for Catholics] of holy joy in the Lord and an inducement to lend their assistance . . . by fervent prayer."² Yet the Church wishes to warn ecumenists—and even more her own faithful—of certain doctrinal presuppositions in the movement which manifestly endanger the Christian faith and which must be rejected as heretical. Thus, Catholics certainly cannot hold that the one True Church does not already exist. Other corrosive elements which act as deterrents to unqualified acceptance of this movement toward reunion are indifferentism, anti-dogmatism, and Modernism. These fruits of a false liberalism which in turn resulted from excessive reliance upon "private interpretation" are still discernible factors impeding genuine progress toward union.

Thus Rome sees both sides of the coin: the sincere longing for unity in truth and love, and the eager willingness which might settle for a unity on the basis of the least common denominator. It is her hope, it is her *mission*, to fight the latter tendency and foster the other, which she knows can lead only to herself. How to carry out this mission, when those concerned reject her authority? She is not without a program, and that program is the burden of the 1949 *Instruction*. There, Catholics are given four distinct directives for furthering reunion. The first of these concerns all the faithful, and is in fact the most important. This is prayer, fervent prayer, coupled with fraternal charity and good example. The other phases of the program pertain to specialists: to bishops, priests, and trained theologians. Since these experts come to grips more directly with the ecumenical question, we should like to discuss their roles more fully.

With regard to the ecumenical meetings themselves, the instruction commands all local bishops to keep themselves, and the Holy See, well informed of any such activities taking place in their dioceses, while endeavoring to assist the participants in their search for truth and at the same time preserving Catholics from compromise of the Faith. To this end:

Let them appoint suitable priests, who in accordance with the teaching and the directions of the Holy See . . . shall give close attention to the movement and make a report about it at the time and in the manner prescribed.³

Thus we find that two well qualified American priests, Fathers Gustave Weigel, S.J., and John B. Sheerin, C.S.P., attended the September, 1957 meeting of Faith and Order at Oberlin, Ohio.

There as "accredited observers," they took no part in the actual discussions, but were present, and were available to give authoritative Catholic answers to questions asked by the participants. A further fruit of their attendance has taken the form of several enlightening articles by each priest which have appeared in leading Catholic periodicals.

Even further opportunities for inter-faith communication were given to all local ordinaries by granting faculties to organize such colloquies, for a limited trial period, on their own initiative and at their prudent discretion. Catholic bishops may now take the initiative in holding their own meetings with non-Catholics, meeting not directed merely toward the exposition of Church teachings (e.g., convert classes, or lectures on the faith to non-Catholics)—for these have always been permitted—but toward a strictly ecumenical purpose. What is really envisioned are meetings between Catholic and Protestant theologians, whether open to all comers or restricted to a small, highly trained group. While such meetings have not yet taken place in America, they are fairly common in Europe, and especially in Germany, where The *una Sancta* movement has effectively brought the two groups together. Here there is no wish to win the other fellow by force or argument, nor on the other hand to reach agreement by paring down one's own position, but rather, as a Catholic participant has stated, by "meditating, not disputing." The hope is that this meditation will help the Catholic to see what is Catholic in the Protestant tradition, and the Protestant, how what is positive in the Reformation is fully realized only in the Catholic Church.

Lastly, the Church certainly wishes her theologians to interest themselves in the ecumenical movement, and while avoiding undue enthusiasm, to use their writings and studies to guide it toward true Christian unity. They must then become acquainted with the principles and the public statements of ecumenical theologians, must come to appreciate their susceptibilities and their reserve. Then they may put their own theology to work in showing the falsity and danger in certain tendencies; in helping to clarify theological problems which confront the Council and its members; and in gearing their explanation and defense of Catholic doctrine to the thought-and-speech-patterns of their non-Catholic counterparts. It would seem they should direct their attentions more and more to those questions which are most crucial for ecumenism: the nature of Christ's church; its doctrinal authority; the New Testament origins of Christianity;

and the historical and theological bases for the Reformation and the religious cleavage it produced. Indeed, so vast is the field, that we might almost speak of a new epoch in theology. Happy to say, many good men are at work in the field, among them such noted Dominicans as Henry St. John and Victor White in the English Province, and in France Jerome Hamer and Yves Congar. One could mention too a work that goes hand in hand with this, the theological apostolate to the dissident Christians of the East. Here again Dominicans are active, side by side with Benedictines, Assumptionists, Jesuits and others; the Russian-orientated review of the French Dominicans, *Istina*, has one of the finest reputations in the field.

Catholics can make a tremendous contribution to these contemporary moves for Christian unity. The nature of our contribution is clearly defined in Christ's words to the Samaritan woman: You adore what you know not: we adore what we know (Jn. 4:22). Men are searching for unity; we know the one place they can find it. We must do everything we can to make their search a successful one.

FOOTNOTES

¹ Weigel, Gustave, S.J., *A Catholic Primer on the Ecumenical Movement* (Westminster, Md., 1957), p. 5.

² *Instruction of the Holy Office on the Ecumenical Movement* (reprint of the official English translation, with commentary by Rev. William Conway, J.C.D.), Garrison, N. Y., 1952. Preface (unpaged).

³ *op cit.*, Section I.



Now, the unity of the Church requires that all the faithful agree as to the faith. But certain questions can arise concerning those matters which are the content of faith. But the Church would be divided through a diversity of judgments unless it were preserved in its unity through the judgment of one. Therefore in order that the unity of the Church may be preserved it is essential that there be one who is supreme over the whole Church. But it is clear that Christ does not fail the Church in things which are necessary—the Church which he loved and for which he gave his blood. For even of the synagogue it is said through the words of the Lord: What further ought I to do for my vine that I have not done. Isaiah 5:4. It must not then be doubted that by the ordination of Christ there is one supreme over the whole Church. *Summa Contra Gentiles* IV, 76.