

CHRISTIAN DISUNITY, CATHOLIC ECUMENISM, AND THE SECOND VATICAN COUNCIL

Bishops will come together from every corner of the world to discuss important matters of religion. But the most pressing topics will be those which concern the spread of the Catholic faith, the revival of Christian standards of morality, and the bringing of ecclesiastical discipline into closer accord with the needs and conditions of our times. This in itself will provide an outstanding example of truth, unity, and love. May those who have been separated from this Apostolic See, beholding this manifestation of unity, derive from it the inspiration to seek out that unity which Jesus Christ prayed for so ardently from his heavenly Father.

*Encyclical Ad Petri Cathedram
John XXIII, June 29, 1959*

These words of the Holy Father make explicit what is already clear to anyone who has followed the preparatory activities of the approaching Council. To actually reunify Christianity will not be the intention of the Conciliar Fathers; nor will Christian unity be their immediate concern. Still, just as clearly the Council intends to have and will have a dynamic effect upon today's ecumenical effort. So much is this true that Yves Congar, O.P., ecumenist and consultant to the Council's Theological Commission, recently could say, the Council "will be wholly attuned to unity."

All Catholics are joined in the prayer and joyful hope that the coming Council will be instrumental in uniting all Christians in the One Body of Christ. But, we should be unfaithful to the grace which evokes that prayer and hope, if unrealistically we were either too optimistic or too pessimistic. The disunity problem is extremely complex and difficult; the path to its solution is long and involved. Hence, if we are to be really sincere in our prayers for the success of the Council and we are to have a "reason for the hope which is in us," at least a general knowledge of the nature of the unity problem and a "layman's" insight into the ecumenical attempt are necessary. Let us, then, consider here three points which will

supply an informed basis for evaluating the Council's true "unity potential." First: the nature of the disunity separating Catholics from non-Catholic Christians. Second: the goals of the Catholic ecumenical movement. Third: the assistance to the ecumenical apostolate which we can reasonably expect from the Council.

Without attempting an exhaustive treatment, let us try to sketch the unity problem in its broad outlines and indicate, in general, the way in which the Council will approach its solution.

The Nature of Christian Disunity

First let us clarify two notions essential to our discussion: the general meaning of the term, unity, and the nature of the Church. Unity implies oneness, wholeness, completeness. In a thing made up of parts, its unity is the totality of its parts, each working together with the others in the community of the whole. Hence, the disunity of a thing composed of parts is the disharmony of its parts or, in its strictest sense, the estrangement of its parts from one another or from the whole. Now, just as a part cannot be understood except in relation to a whole, so too the disunity of a part cannot be understood except in terms of the relation it bears, even when separated, to the whole. For disunity implies not only a separation, but also some inherent need of the separated parts to be one with the whole. For example, who would say that, during the Civil War, the southern states were merely separated from the United States? England and France were separated from her. But the southern states, even though they considered themselves sovereign and independent national units, were never called merely "separated," but always "disunited." For they were looked upon as parts of the whole nation. In spite of their avowed disalliance, they belonged by law, custom, and national heritage to the one union which is the United States. The point is that nothing can be properly called "disunited" unless there is inherent in that thing a real, ontological, objective relation or tendency to the whole from which it is separated. Non-Catholic Christians are truly "disunited" from the Church. Therefore, if we can clearly understand the kind of relation they have to the Church, we will approach a grasp of the true nature of Christian disunity.

The second essential notion is the nature of the Church. The Church is not simply a moral organization, a social body; nor is she merely a community of grace. To call her either of these is to fall into the error of the Reformers, who professed the existence of two Churches—one visible, the

other invisible. On the contrary, the Church is one, unique, supernatural organism: at once a visible body and an invisible life. The one Church, the Roman Catholic Church, is a visible communion of the faithful under the Vicar of Christ and an invisible communion of all Christian souls in whom the Holy Spirit dwells. The Church, like Christ, has as it were the two natures: an invisible one, its life of grace, and a visible one, its human members, liturgy, sacraments, ordered hierarchy, and the supreme witness to its unity, the Roman Pontiff. These two "natures" are really two aspects of the same one thing: they must be seen together as being the one Mystical Body of Christ. In the words of Henri De Lubac, S.J., "there then is the Church—human and divine at once even in her visibility, 'without division and without confusion,' just like Christ Himself, whose body she mystically is."¹

The Church, moreover, was not instituted by Christ as a third party commissioned to stand between Himself and His followers. The Church is not an additional mediator between ourselves and our One Mediator with the Father. Instead of being placed between Christ and Christians, she makes Christ present to the men of all ages. Christ, the sole source of supernatural life, dispenses that life to men in and by way of His Church. To put it quite simply, the Church is Christ. Jesus in His earthly life brought men to the knowledge of the invisible things of God by the visibility of his corporeal body and wrought supernatural miracles through His natural body. So too does the Church, His Mystical Body, effect in the souls of its members the internal, invisible bonds of grace through its external, visible "signs"—her scriptures, her sacraments, her hierarchical government, etc. And precisely the external aspect of the Church is the cause and sign of her invisible, supernatural life of grace. The visible body manifests the internal, invisible bond uniting all her human members to each other and to Christ their Head.

Thus the Church is not only a community of souls, each living a supernatural life. She is also the visible communion of those souls, all reading her scriptures, using her sacramentals, singing God's praises in her prayers, receiving nourishment for their divine life from her sacraments, offering themselves to the Father through her Sacrifice, living in the communal peace of her law and government. These "signs" or "goods," this external "patrimony," are part of the very constitution of the Church. The fulness of this external "patrimony" is found only in the Roman Church. She alone possesses fully the Christian heritage. She alone makes Christ present to men, uniting them in his one Mystical Body.

Moreover, the Church is One; there is no shade of disunity in the Mystical Body of Christ itself. It is ever constituted in the perfect harmony of its internal and external elements. If Christ is One, His Church cannot be many. If Christ is undivided, His Church is likewise indivisible. For the Church is His Mystical Body. But her unity, like her existence, has two aspects—one internal and invisible, the other external and visible. Externally she is a unity in the oneness of her faith, worship, and government which causes and manifests the internal oneness of her supernatural life in the souls of her members. Her doctrine, sacraments, Sacrifice, and hierarchy are essentially one and the same for all people and all times. It is these very things that produce the supernatural grace and charity which bind her members together in her one spiritual communion. Granted, in non-essential elements the Church's external rites and laws may change according to time and place and the supernatural life of her members may be more or less intense in individual souls. But in the essentials of her faith, worship, and government and in the one Spirit dwelling in Catholic souls she is the same one Church to all men, the indivisible Body of Christ.

If that is the unity of the Church, it is in those terms that we must explain the "unity" of her members with her. It is also in terms of that insight that we must understand the state of Christian souls who are "dis-united" from her. The individual Catholic is in vital unity with the Mystical Body of Christ because he participates in both her unifying elements. The members of a physical body are not called members simply because they are vivified by the same internal life of the whole body, but also because they are nourished by and contribute to the visible well-being of the body. Similarly, members of the Church in the fullest sense are those who share in her supernatural life and grace by receiving her sacraments, obeying her hierarchy, and professing her faith. Catholics are fully members of the Church because they are united to her Head and to all her members in all things, both internal and external.

What then of non-Catholic Christians? Are they completely separated from the Church in the way, for example, France and England are "separated" from the United States? Or do they bear some real relation to the Church because of which we can say they are truly "disunited" from her? We are here speaking of good-willed, innocently dissident Christians, men who have been born into an atmosphere foreign to the Church but who confess Christ to be their Mediator with the Father, are trying to live the Christian life, and sincerely do not realize their state of disunity from the one true Church. The discussion is confined only to those people of the

Protestant communions and Orthodox churches who are in fact, as well as in name, Christians.

The Popes have spoken often of dissident Christians. Benedict XV says that the dissidents of the East are "part of the Christian people." Pius XI refers to them as "part of the Lord's flock." Pius XII praises them for "the constancy of their virtue and the profession of the Christian faith" in times of dire persecution; he even describes their dead as martyrs for the faith. Protestants are spoken of in similar fashion by the Supreme Pontiffs. Leo XIII says of all religious men in Anglican England: "in these the divine kingdom endures on earth." Again speaking of separated Christians, the same Pontiff testifies to having "observed the frequent and manifest signs of grace in their midst." Pius XII also asserts of Protestants that "while not belonging to the visible structure of the Church," they are related to it "by love for the person of Christ or belief in God" or (as he says in another place) "by faith in God and Jesus Christ."

From these and similar statements by the Supreme Teachers of Christendom, it is clear that dissident Christians share in the gifts of supernatural faith and charity. But since supernatural faith and charity cannot be possessed by a soul unless it has received divine grace, it is evident that the souls of dissident Christians are the dwelling places of the Holy Spirit. In the souls of Protestant and Orthodox Christians there is supernatural life—the same life which is the internal bond of unity between actual members of the Church. But where does this life come from: what has brought it to birth in these souls? If these Christians are not fully members of the Church, living in one communion by her external bonds of unity, how have they received the same life as that of her members?

In both the Orthodox churches and Protestant confessions, to a greater or lesser degree depending upon the confession or church considered, the external "patrimony" of the Church is truly operative. When the founders of the various dissident communions cut themselves off from the Church of Rome, they took with them a part of the Christian inheritance—the Church's scriptures, her sacraments, her validly ordained hierarchical government, the very name "Christian." If these men were heretics or schismatics in the strict or formal sense (i.e., if their acts were deliberate and urged by an evil will), for them these "goods" were supernaturally worthless; their sinfully assumed condition thwarted the innate effectiveness of the Church's "signs" of grace. But these same "goods" were and are today instruments productive of divine faith and charity in the souls of their good-willed and guiltlessly obedient followers. Through this partial "patri-

mony" of the Church, although it was misappropriated and is now illegitimately possessed by their communities, dissident Christians have received the Christian name and life. The "goods" of the Church are meant to bring souls to supernatural life and to foster their growth to an adult union with God in Christ. This can be done safely only in an environment of the fulness of faith, through the complete sacramental system, and under the guidance of a paternally unified hierarchy—namely, in Christ's Body, the Roman Catholic Church. Hence, for the Christian soul, separation from that Church is fearfully dangerous. Yet, the "patrimony" of the Church, even in the unwholesome surroundings to which it has been taken, effects the grace and truth it signifies. Although the dissident communities are the sources of impediments to healthy and sure growth in the supernatural life, they are also responsible for the birth of that life and its enfeebled efforts toward fulfillment. For, acting by and through the external power of the Church, they have rendered Christ present to their adherents. There is no power proper to the dissident communities by which they have done this. But because the Church has been operative in them, their sincere and obedient members have been brought to supernatural life.

Thus it is that the disunity of these dissident Christians is so heart-rending to the Roman Church. She is their "afflicted mother" who "awaits them not as strangers but as sons who return to their paternal home." For they have been born to her life by the Church. Pope John XXIII in his encyclical *Aeterna Dei Sapientia*, quoting Pope St. Leo I, says that baptism "renders each Christian a member of Christ." Baptism, one of her external "goods," belongs by right to the Church to administer. But, even if it is given by dissident ministers, it is nonetheless valid and productive of supernatural life. Hence, all who receive it, whether Protestant or Orthodox, receive by its sacramental power the life of Christ. And they hold that life in common with all the actual members of Christ's Mystical Body. We may also infer from the teachings of the Roman Pontiffs, that those who receive Christ, not by baptism but through the Church's non-sacramental "goods" (e.g., the Bible), confessing Him with supernatural faith and loving Him with perfect charity, are one with all who share the life of grace. Hence, although no Protestant or Orthodox who sincerely believes his confession to be the true one will declare it, dissident Christians are truly sons of the Church. It is by her external power that they have been made "sons of God and heirs of heaven."

Moreover, beyond the faith and grace which they have in common with actual members of the Catholic Church, there is within the souls of

dissident Christians a real, ontological, inhering tendency to full and complete membership in the Church of Rome. From the supernatural life, the sanctifying grace, which vivifies their souls there proceeds immediately the theological virtues of faith and charity. That the dissidents are possessors of true faith and charity we have already seen. But, is not the first act of charity a complete and total commitment to do the will of God? No one can truly love God and not desire to do all He wills, even if all His desires are not actually known. Therefore, because it is the will of God that all men be united in His One, Roman, Catholic Church, all sincere dissident Christians desire full membership in that Church. Hardly can this desire be an explicit and conscious one, else, the dissident Christians would be insincere, remaining disunited from visible unity with the Church they know to be Christ's one, true Church. Rather, this desire is unconscious and implicit; it is contained in their expressed and known desire to do the will of God.

Thus we can see that dissident Christians are related to the Roman Church both by a real sonship—from the supernatural life, possessed in common with all Catholics in the state of grace and born in them by the external power of the Church—and by a real, though implicit, desire for complete membership with her. But, as our Holy Father recently said, making the words of Pope St. Leo his own, "there can be no perfect union of the faithful with Christ the Head, nor union among themselves as members of the same living organism, if, to the spiritual links of virtue, worship, and sacraments there is not added the external profession of the same father." And, "the center and fulcrum of all visible unity of the Catholic Church, then, is the Bishop of Rome as successor of St. Peter and Vicar of Jesus Christ." Hence, dissident Christians, who are neither perfectly in union with the Roman Pontiff nor consciously one with the Church's profession of faith, sacramental life, and hierarchical government, are not "united" to the Church as full and complete members of it. But from what we have seen, it is evident that they are not merely "separated" from her. Rather, they are properly speaking "disunited" from her. For, although visibly separated, they are ordained by a partial use of the Church's external "patrimony" and the internal bond of grace to becoming fully her members.

Thus in papal documents of modern times, dissident Christians are called "separated brethren." They are indeed separated from the Church; but they are related to it by an indissoluble filial bond. The Christians of Protestantism and Orthodoxy are in a very real sense our brethren. As

Cardinal Bea, President of the Secretariate for Promoting Christian Unity, recently stated, "We must, not in words alone, but in deed, as well, consider our separated brothers, as real brothers, as St. Augustine has so wondrously put it, in words which the Holy Father recalls to us in his Encyclical, *Ad Petri Cathedram*, 'Whether or not they will it so, they are our brothers. They shall not cease to be our brothers until they cease to say: Our Father . . .'"

Catholic Ecumenism

Toward our disunited brethren the Church has a great responsibility. Their Christian life is fearfully endangered by the environment into which it has been born. To foster the return of our brethren to their maternal home is one of the Church's principal concerns. She is meeting her responsibility by an apostolate called Catholic ecumenism. These words of Pius XI are a good introduction for a discussion of its goals:

For a reunion it is above all necessary to know and to love one another. To know one another, because if the efforts of reunion have failed so many times, this is in large measure due to mutual ignorance. If there are prejudices on both sides, these prejudices must fall. Incredible are the errors and equivocations which persist and are handed down among the separated brethren against the Catholic Church; on the other hand, Catholics also have sometimes failed in justly evaluating the truth or, on account of insufficient knowledge, in showing a fraternal spirit. Do we know all that is valuable, good, and Christian in the fragments of ancient Catholic truth? Detached fragments of a gold-bearing rock also contain the precious ore. The ancient Churches of the East have retained so true a holiness that they deserve not only our respect but also our sympathy.

These words, spoken with reference to the dissidents of the East, should also be applied to our relations with Protestants, but with some modification. Although our charity for Protestants must be the same as for our Orthodox brethren, our sympathy for their spiritual inheritance cannot be wholly unreserved. Because they have fallen farther from the truth of faith, there is a greater danger to the faith of Catholics investigating Protestant doctrine and a greater need for insistence upon the uncompromising nature of Catholic truth. Still, we must show them "the same spirit of fairness, of honest research, of true appreciation of their authentic Christian values"² as we evidence toward our Orthodox brethren.

Ecumenism is neither convert work nor missionary activity. Convert work concerns isolated Christians, who have already questioned the truth of their non-Catholic confession. It seeks to bring those Christians to a full knowledge and love for the true Church; its aim is the immediate incorporation of these souls into the Catholic Church. Mission activity attempts to bring Christ to men who have never heard His Holy Name, to regions whose people are yet unborn to supernatural life. Its goal is the giving of supernatural life. Hence, if the missionary fails to achieve this goal, the baptism of pagans, for them his efforts have no supernatural value at all. Catholic ecumenism is of a quite different character.

The goal of Catholic ecumenism and the nature of its activity will be clarified considerably by a simple distinction. Its ultimate goal is the return of all dissident Christians to complete, integral, fully visible communion with the Roman Church. Its proximate goal (through which its ultimate aim will be achieved) is what clearly distinguishes ecumenism from all other aspects of the apostolate to non-Catholics. This goal is the gradual curing of the Catholic elements, of the "patrimony" of the Church, possessed by the dissident communities. What the ecumenist intends is to heal, in whatever degree possible, the already possessed supernatural life of dissident Christians.

The ecumenical task is to foster, to make easier, the ultimate return of dissident Christians to the Catholic Church (its ultimate goal) by way of a gradual process which produces among our separated brethren "an adherence to the Church of increasing closeness," a "growing desire to participate in the Body of Christ" (its proximate goal). This proximate goal is sought by two principal and complementary means, under the guidance of charity and fidelity to Catholic doctrine. The first: by bringing separated Christians to a closer union with Christ within their own milieu. That is, the Catholic ecumenist does not attempt to snatch dissident Christians from their surroundings. He tries to help them penetrate the truths they now possess and enter more deeply into their use of the Church's external "goods." These "goods" are for them the sources of supernatural life and communion with the Church. Hence, by more fully living the Catholic truth contained in their Orthodox or Protestant confessions, their internal direction to the Church will of itself flower into a closer union with the Mystical Body. Even a partial success of the ecumenical effort is a great supernatural benefit to our separated brethren. The second principal means is the dispelling of intellectual and emotional barriers to actual reunification with the Roman Church. This is carried out in objective and coopera-

tive research into the historical and theological backgrounds, causes, doctrines and practices which have led to Christian disunity. The absence of a proselytizing approach to these efforts at mutual understanding itself stands as a testimony to dissident Christians of the Church's sympathy and respect for them.

Certainly, prayer is the strongest ecumenical weapon the Church possesses. It is the means most Catholics use to fulfill their ecumenical obligation. To the bishops falls the obligation to execute the outward and observable means of pastoral assistance and theological interchange. But, because the ignorance and prejudice of centuries must be dissolved by the ecumenical enterprise, this work has been delegated to highly trained historians and theologians.

Second Vatican Council

With some understanding of today's Christian disunity and the goals of the Catholic ecumenical movement, we can turn to the third topic of discussion: the assistance to the ecumenical apostolate which can reasonably be expected from the Council.

Short of a miraculous intervention of the Holy Spirit, a reunification of the Orthodox churches or the Protestant confessions with Rome will not be effected at the Council. The Eastern Schism has been 900 years in existence; Protestant Christianity has been disunited from the Church for over 400 years. The misunderstandings and prejudices grown up through those centuries are only beginning to be dispelled. Essential differences in doctrine, worship, and government—which the Church in fidelity to Christ can never compromise—still separate Catholics from their dissident brethren. It is only by a long and patient ecumenical effort, described by the popes as a "journey," "a gradual process," leading "more and more towards the lost unity," that these long-standing barriers to complete Christian unity will be broken down. The Conciliar Fathers cannot be expected to accomplish this work and actually effect reunification in the few short weeks or months they will be in session.

Although the dissident communities are not opposed to the unification of Christianity and are openly seeking it, they are clearly not psychologically prepared at the present time to accept that unity in the Church of Rome. A few statements of dissident churchmen make this evident. Rev. Angus J. MacQueen, Moderator of the United Church of Canada says the possibility of Catholic-Protestant union is "very remote." Reinhold Nie-

buhr has said, "I see no sign whatever of a Catholic-Protestant church unity." "We cannot fix the time. Perhaps it will be fifty years, perhaps fifteen," said Patriarch Athenagoras I, primate of the Eastern Orthodox churches.

On the other hand, there is much to be hoped for in these times of Catholic and dissident ecumenical activity. The attempts of the non-Catholic communities to find unity through the Conferences and Congresses of the World Council of Churches is indeed encouraging. Likewise are the unity conversations of individual Protestant confessions among themselves (e.g., those of the Methodist, Episcopal, United Church of Christ, and United Presbyterian churches last April). The return to a fuller liturgical life and the practice of personal confession of sins by some Lutheran groups is a sign of the gradual healing of the Christian "patrimony" they possess. Many Catholic individuals, Fathers Congar and Dumont for example, and groups, *Istinia* and *Una Sancta* for instance, have been diligent in the ecumenical apostolate. They have done much to bring about today's more congenial attitude toward Rome. And the petition for Christian unity raised to God daily in the canon of the Mass and at other special times such as the Church Unity Octave holds out to us a great hope for ecumenical success.

Already it is apparent that many dissident church leaders have made a better psychological adjustment toward the Roman Church. The Ecumenical Council of Churches states, "It is matter for rejoicing that it is now possible to hold a dialogue with the Church of Rome." Dr. Eugene Carson Blake of the Presbyterian Church in America asserts that "the pope has certainly contributed toward the creation of an atmosphere of union which now reigns among Christian Churches." Even Karl Barth recently remarked, "There is a new possibility of fraternal discussion with the Church of Rome." All these statements have been made since the Holy Father announced the Council. Patriarch Athenagoras of Constantinople went further in greeting the news of the Council as a hope for Christian unity saying, "There was a man sent from God, and his name is John."

The Council will surely, as its immediate effect upon Christian unity, further the breakdown of distrust and suspicion. The Holy Father already has stepped boldly in this direction by instituting the Secretariate for Promoting Christian Unity. It is intimately connected with the work of Catholic ecumenism and the coming Council. Its immediate purpose is twofold: 1) to accurately inform non-Catholic Christians of the work of the Council and to receive from them their wishes and suggestions relating to the

Council's deliberations; and 2) to guide the Council in theological and pastoral matters which directly or indirectly bear on the problem of Christian unity. Its long range goal is to aid all good-willed non-Catholic Christians to find the unity for which they are ardently seeking. This goal it intends to accomplish by determining the unity problems peculiar to each nation of the world, by explicating the points of doctrine, cult, and discipline which the dissident groups have in common with the Roman Church, and by discovering the ways in which the Catholic Church can help them to a true and complete communion with itself. In the event the Secretariate remains operative after the Council is disbanded (which seems highly probable), it will be an official witness to our separated brethren of the Church's desire to actively assist them in finding the unity which is theirs by right of their Christian life and name.

The Council itself will give considerable direct aid to the ecumenical movement by its doctrinal pronouncements, precisising the Catholic position on points of common belief as well as in areas of dispute. It is hoped by many non-Catholic churchmen that the Council will explain the mind of the Church on such points as, the measure in which Protestant communities can now be called "members" of the Church, the Church's position on mixed marriage, the Church's doctrine on religious liberty, the precise meaning of the infallible magisterium of the pope and bishops, and the true nature of the Church itself.

But perhaps its greatest assistance to ecumenism will be indirect. For by "the revival of Christian standards of morality and the bringing of ecclesiastical discipline into closer accord with the needs and conditions of our times," it must enhance the Church's own witness to Christian unity. John XXIII expressed this clearly in an address to the diocesan presidents of Italian Catholic Action:

The Ecumenical Council will be a demonstration, uniquely far-reaching in its significance, of truly world-wide catholicity. . . . By God's grace, then, we shall hold this Council; we shall prepare for it by working hard at whatever on the Catholic side most needs to be healed and strengthened according to the teaching of our Lord. When we have carried out this strenuous task, eliminated everything which could at the human level hinder our rapid progress, then we shall point to the Church in all her splendor, *sine macula et ruga* (without blemish or disfiguration), and say to all those who are separated from us, Orthodox, Protestants, and the rest: Look, brothers, this is the Church of Christ. We have striven to be true to her, to ask the Lord for grace that she may re-

main forever what He willed. Come: here the way lies open for meeting and for homecoming; come; take, or resume, that place which is yours. . . .

We also can hope, with the Church, that our separated brethren will consider the Council's deliberations and pronouncements with sincere attention and thus be moved to a fuller penetration of the true Christian heritage of their own confessions, to a closer union with the Mystical Body through the internal bonds of grace and love, and ultimately to a complete visible unity of one faith, one discipline, and one worship in the Catholic, Roman Church.

The Council will not accomplish the ultimate goal of Catholic ecumenism. But it will give that apostolate a dynamic impetus which will attain fulfillment when, as says the Holy Father, "the peaceful embrace of the children of the same heavenly Father, equally co-heirs of the same reign of glory, will mark the celebration of the triumph of the Mystical Body of Christ."

—Mannes Beissel, O.P.

¹ Henri De Lubac, S.J., *The Splendor of the Church*, (New York: Sheed and Ward, 1956), p. 69.

² Gregory Baum, O.S.A., *That They May Be One*, (Westminster: Newman, 1958), p. 110.

All unnoted quotations have been taken from papal documents.