

## THE ABBÉ PAUL COUTURIER<sup>1</sup>

DOM BENEDICT LEY

IN the cemetery of Loyasse on the hill of Fourvière, overlooking the great city of Lyons in France, there is a special plot reserved for departed priests. Here last September I came to pray at the grave of my friend Abbé Paul Couturier. He died on March 24th, 1953, aged seventy-two. 'Il fut un Apôtre de l'Unité des Chrétiens', so runs the inscription on his gravestone. But the past tense is surely a little deceptive and out of place. For to thousands of Christians all over Europe, in these isles and in America, whether Roman Catholic or Anglican, Orthodox or Protestant, the Abbé Couturier is still a messenger sent by God to awaken them to the intolerable scandal of disunity and to proclaim the way to hasten its end—a way all can follow without denying anything of God's truth as it has been shown to them, and without any disloyalty to their respective traditions. For it was the special grace of this humble priest of Lyons to see that the cause of Christian Unity is primarily a matter of the spiritual life. He saw clearly that the first and most vital task laid on Christians by the terrible fact of their outward divisions is the fullest living of the Christian life, the greatest possible response to the grace of their incorporation in Christ by Baptism. Indeed we must all be so given over to the One Lord we profess to follow that all our reactions to persons and events are Christian—even our unconscious reactions. The more all Christians allow Christ to impress on them his own dispositions and to root them in the very fibre of their being the more effective and potent will be their prayer for Unity.

Such is the first and greatest lesson my friend taught. And this not merely by what he wrote or said but by what he was. For in his contact with others, with Christians not of his communion, he showed an unflinching charity, the charity that sees all men in the Heart of Christ and seeks Christ and only Christ in its contact with them. And so Abbé Couturier could and did rejoice in all that was of Christ and from Christ in his non-Roman Catholic

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friends. He had the greatest reverence for the work of the grace of Christ wherever he found it, and did his best to sanctify his Anglican friends by putting them into a relationship of spiritual emulation with their Catholic brethren in France. He saw, in such a holy rivalry in generosity to God, an effective way to burn up and destroy the uncharity, suspicion and mistrust which is Satan's surest way to attempt to defeat the cause of Unity and maintain our divisions.

In the Most Holy Trinity the Second Person is the Word breathing forth love. This is why my friend set himself to enkindle others, not merely to enlighten them. He knew that fire gives light as well as heat: *ex igne lux*, as he loved to say. And so he set himself to light a tremendous fire of charity in the hearts of all Christians everywhere. For the fire that encompasses the week of Prayer for Christian Unity must also diffuse light. It is meant to do so. To answer the call of this week, to let Christ pray his own prayer for Unity in us, will surely bring us all greater light. Indeed, we cannot allow his prayer free course in us without submitting all our will to it. So those who keep rightly this great week of prayer must all cease to wish for unity as the triumph of their own ideas about it and begin to will it as he wills it and to will the means that he wills for its fulfilment. Thus it is that every year there is an ever-growing number of Christians who pray in an invincible hope that he who is the one bread that we break as a sign of unity will give us this unity when he wills and by the means that he wills.

To be present when the Abbé broke this bread, to assist at his Mass, was to learn whence he drew the strength to drive his frail body to the end in his indefatigable labours to promote the observance of the week of prayer. To see the man as he really was, one had to be with him at his deepest moments and witness the consecration with which he pleaded Christ's all-sufficient sacrifice. One learnt then whence came that charity which enabled him to respect the consciences and convictions of others, without any sort of disloyalty to any claim or dogma of the Roman Catholic Church. Indeed, I am convinced that it was precisely because his faith in all the Roman Church teaches was so deep and strong that he saw so clearly that the more his separated brethren deepened their hold on and lived by the truths they believed in common with the Roman Church the more eager they would be for

union with her. This is why he always came back to the primacy of the spiritual life in all his work and thoughts about the unity of Christians. And this is why his great heart was so deeply wounded by any sort of proselytism or any attempt to force the consciences or alter roughly the convictions of others. The idea of scoring over an opponent in controversy or of winning a victory for one's own Church because it was one's own was utterly repugnant to him. He did not like to say 'We have the truth: you have not, and so we are superior to you.' Such a sectarian spirit defeats its own end. Rather he preferred to say the truth possesses us. For when souls are possessed by the truth then it can radiate from them, enlighten and enkindle others.

When I think of my friend and remember his invincible confidence in the ultimate triumph of the cause of Unity I am scared at my own lack of hope and faith. He never despaired when confronted with obstacles, neither was he deterred by the magnitude of the task before him. I am sure that the secret of his hope is to be found in the fullness of his personal oblation to Christ. He would love to tell one of lives sacrificed or offered to God for Unity. He was himself such a victim for it. And so he could put up with and endure all the sufferings his work brought him and the immense labour it entailed. He could not yield to despair and think the ultimate goal impossible to attain or only capable of achievement by the very slow process of individual conversions. For, even when good and laudable, such conversions do not solve the problem of Unity, but often exacerbate it. Moreover, if such a process were successful, it would dissipate all the cultural riches of God's work in the different Christian traditions and the contribution these have each to make when Unity is attained.

The Abbé's hope remained invincible because by his complete acceptance of his own share in Christ's Passion for Unity he had entered already into its triumph. So he knew that the cause for which he suffered and died would be victorious in the end. And his pains and weariness of mind and body in his last months only served to increase his hope and make it more invulnerable.

As I stood by his grave last September and prayed for him and to him it seemed to me, as it seems to his friends in Lyons, that he was there with me; more alive, more active than ever before, bringing me the assurance that Christ will give us Unity by the means that he wills and when he wills. 'Il fut un Apôtre de l'Unité

des Chrétiens', and he still is, calling all Christians to realize the scandal and horror of their divisions and to take here and now the immediate remedy for it—total surrender to Christ, the Master of the impossible, and complete response to his prayer, his supreme desire, *Ut omnes unum sint!*



## ESSAYS IN CHRISTIAN UNITY<sup>1</sup>

GEOFFREY CURTIS, C.R.

**T**HOSE who have laboured and prayed specially for Christian Unity will read, reread, ponder and treasure this book with great gratitude. We pray that it will be very widely read and studied. Such writing has been awaited by Anglicans for at least a century: we could hardly expect it before when the nation which we represented was still persecuting the Church of Rome in our land. Perhaps it is in the fulness of time that it has come: for the work seems to be in striking concord with the teaching and spirit of Pope Pius XII, the inspired leader whom Providence has given to edify and guide the Church of our day. One of its excellences would seem to be that it indicates practical applications of the latter's counsels in the special conditions of our land.

The essays collected in this volume are of various dates from 1928 to 1954. They are unquestionably occasional utterances. Yet paradoxically enough this volume may well come to be regarded as the classic expression of the oecumenical attitude of Rome. It would deserve this place because of the deep level at which the problems of oecumenism are tackled and the doctrine involved in these expounded; but also by reason of the marked qualification of the writer to fulfil this task. Here is at last an English Roman Catholic leader, and remarkably enough a 'convert' from Anglicanism, who though he has found certainty and peace elsewhere, can see the Church of England clearly and see it whole. (The

<sup>1</sup> *Essays in Christian Unity*. By Henry St John, O.P. (Blackfriars; 12s. 6d.)