

ROMAN CATHOLIC ECUMENISM

The following article represents a responsible Anglican view. Its author, the Rev. Francis House, is an Anglican living in Geneva in close official touch with the work of the World Council of Churches at its headquarters. The article is reprinted, by kind permission of the Editor, from Faith and Unity, the Journal of the Church Union Committee for the Defence of Church principles.

IS 'Catholic Ecumenism' a contradiction in terms? Many Catholics inside and outside the Roman Church do in fact appear to consider that the ecumenical movement is a wholly Protestant phenomenon. References to the dangers of 'pan-protestantism' have been made in the Church Assembly itself! It is therefore interesting to note that a writer in *Istina*,¹ the French Roman Catholic quarterly, considers that the use of the term 'oecuménisme catholique' is fully justified, because the word 'ecumenism' is properly used to designate 'the totality of the attempts made by the Christian world for the restoration of Christian unity'.

There is in fact a considerable 'ecumenical movement' in the Roman Catholic Church, especially in France and Germany but not by any means without its reflection in Rome. Roman Catholic ecumenists are more numerous on the continent than many Anglicans realize. Among those writing in French we may specially recall the names of Fathers Boyer, Lialine, Dumont, Couturier and Congar, while the Germans include Metzger (martyred by the Nazis), Pribilla and Sartory. Benedictines, Dominicans and Jesuits are all involved. Other Roman Catholic journals devoted specially to ecumenical questions include *Unitas* (Rome), *Irenikon* (Belgium), *Vers l'unité chrétienne* (France), *Bulletin d'Orientations Oecuméniques* (Beyrout) and *Una Sancta* (Germany). Professor Gustav Thils of Louvain has written the most systematic study of the theological significance of the World Council of Churches,² Fr Edward Duff, S.J., is the author of an important book on the social thought of the Council.³ Father Maurice

1 Fr M. J. Le Guillou, O.P. *Istina*, 1956: pp. 333-356 and 416-442, especially page 422.

2 *Histoire doctrinale du mouvement oecuménique*. E. M. Warny, Louvain 1955. 260 pp.

3 *The social thought of the W.C.C.* Longmans, Green and Co., London 1956. 339 pp.

Villain's moving biography of *L'abbé Paul Couturier: apôtre de l'unité chrétienne* contains numerous documents of 'catholic ecumenism', and Fr Congar's *Chrétiens désunis: principes d'un 'oecuménisme' catholique* (the French edition is much to be preferred to the English), although it is now getting out of date in its historical references to the World Council, is still most valuable as a massive exposé of the Catholic concern for ecumenism.

Nor is this Roman Catholic ecumenical thinking exterior to or isolated from the study work of the World Council itself. A group of Roman Catholic scholars has been meeting regularly for some years to study the major documents of the Council. The group made a much appreciated contribution to thinking about the main theme ("The Christian Hope") of the Second Assembly held at Evanston in 1954, and is currently engaged in work on the Lordship of Christ—one of the major concerns of the Council's Division of Studies.

This Catholic concern is not confined to a few monks and professors. In many dioceses of the Roman Church great efforts are being made to arouse the interest and enlist the prayers of the faithful. I have myself had the privilege of attending a crowded public meeting in the Diocese of Lyons at which a Polish priest who had worked in Britain gave a most eirenic account of the Church of England and the English Free Churches. An even more striking example is the recent publication in Germany of a popular Roman Catholic history of the ecumenical movement. The title is *Christians Seek One Church: The Ecumenical Movement and Rome* by J. P. Michael. There are statements and judgments in the book which leaders of the World Council regard as being seriously misleading; nonetheless the fact that thirty thousand copies of such a book have already been sold is an ecumenical event of some importance. A somewhat similar book was published in France in 1954 in the popular 'Editions du Centurion' of Paris. This is *A la rencontre du Protestantisme* by Fr Georges Tavard. In the article in *Istina* already cited, Fr Guillou says of this book that although it is brief, 'nevertheless we find in it the best theological and psychological approach to the ecumenical problem' (p. 420).

It may be helpful to 'non-Roman Catholics' if we attempt to describe briefly some of the characteristic notes of this Roman Catholic ecumenical literature. The first note is penitence for

whatever human pride or lack of charity or spirit of partisanship on the part of the Catholics may have contributed to the beginning and continuation of divisions among Christians. Fr Tavad cites as an example of such 'ecumenical penitence' the speech of Cardinal Pole at the Council of Trent in 1545. The keynote of the speech was his declaration that 'it is our ambition, our avarice, our cupidity, which have brought these evils upon the Kingdom of God'. A modern example would be the writings of Professor Karl Adam about Luther and the Reformation. There is an extraordinary difference between what he has to say about the justification for the protests of Protestantism, and popular Roman misrepresentation of the reformers and their motives. And there are many examples in the writings of the Abbé Couturier. We may refer especially to his appeal to priests in France to offer the Holy Sacrifice on St Bartholomew's Day as an act of reparation for the massacre and for the 'unjust consequences of the revocation of the Edict of Nantes'.

A second condition of fruitful ecumenical work, according to Roman Catholic writers, is willingness to recognize elements of truth which have been preserved in the theological tradition that one is opposing. As Father Congar put it, 'It is necessary to respect the action of the Holy Spirit in the separated bodies'. It is a fatal mistake to ignore or to treat as pagans those who are baptized and who name the name of Christ but who do not belong to the same confession. Fr Tavad writes: 'It is required by fidelity to the Catholic tradition as well as by loyalty to the facts, that we should consider "separated Christianities" as being still, in spite of everything, related to the Church, not only by a relation of opposition, but rather by a veritable sonship (filiation).' (p. 119.)

The Instruction *De Re Oecumenica*, of 1949, defined the new positive attitude of the Vatican to the ecumenical movement. This is now described as being 'a response to the prayers of the faithful' and the result of 'the inspiration of the Holy Spirit'. Its essence is the daily increasing desire 'in the hearts of many who are separated from the Catholic Church' that 'all those who believe in Christ our Lord should return to unity'. There is here, it continues, 'a source of holy joy in the Lord'. Protestant commentators on the Encyclical have often tended to misunderstand its character. But compared with Pius XI's *Mortalium animos* of Epiphany 1938 it represents a revolution in the attitude of the

Vatican. As Father Tavad says: 'Modern ecumenism is not the "pan-christianism" justly denounced by Pius XI. It is not based upon relativism in dogma, but on the affirmation of the "mystery of the Church", which witnesses to Christ in spite of the differences between the confessions which are always regretted but always affirmed' (p. 93). The main purpose of the Encyclical is to direct the Bishops to take an active interest in the development and orientation of the ecumenical movement inside and outside the Roman Church.

A third condition of ecumenical advance, according to these Roman Catholic writers, is the recognition that there can be no return to the *status quo ante*. We cannot simply put the clock back to the time of the separation of East and West, or to the Reformation. One of the chief tasks of Roman Catholic ecumenists is described as being that of helping Protestants to assimilate the results of two Councils held without them and of two definitions pronounced apart from these Councils. On all sides there must be a genuine desire to share in love all that God has taught his people in the course of their history after as well as before their 'unhappy divisions' have occurred. Furthermore, it is recognized as a datum for ecumenical thinking that great movements of renewal by the Spirit in our day have taken small account of confessional barriers. This is specially true of the liturgical revival and of the rediscovery of the rightful responsibilities of the faithful laity in the church—movements which are strongly at work in the Reformed and Lutheran churches on the continent as well as in the Church of Rome. These movements have also direct consequences for ecumenical concern and action. Let me quote Fr Tavad again: 'The liturgical revival has helped to awaken souls to the mystery of Christian unanimity in the common prayer of the Church. The personal practice and discovery of community in the Eucharist and in public worship has deepened in men's hearts a desire that often becomes agonizing to reunite all Christians round the same table of the Lord' (p. 116). And 'the accession of lay people to responsibility and initiative, thanks to Pius XI's Catholic Action, has revealed to many souls the abyss of dissension between Christians' (p. 117).

Ecumenism must be nourished by personal friendship and exchange across confessional frontiers. In the memorable words of Cardinal Mercier in defending such pioneering enterprises as

the Conversations of Malines: 'To unite with one another, we must love one another: to love one another we must know one another: to know one another we must go to meet one another' (cited Villain: *L'Abbé Paul Couturier*, Casterman, Tournai: Paris, 1957, p. 42). Modern Roman Catholic ecumenists repeatedly refer to the danger of 'being satisfied with knowing that one is in the right while all others are wrong'. While being completely loyal to one's own conscience and tradition each one has nevertheless the responsibility for taking whatever opportunities may offer for conversation and co-operation with others of different traditions. (This is the positive side of the various Roman Catholic efforts over the last two generations to establish better relations with the Eastern Orthodox; but lack of space forces us to concentrate here on relations between Western Churches.)

And this meeting and exchange should not, according to the Roman Catholic authors, be confined only to the ecumenical stratosphere. They must engage the interest and prayers of the mass of the faithful. 'The ideal of Christian unity must undoubtedly have its pioneers, but if these really wish to serve the tradition and to maintain themselves in it, they must somehow get the prayers of the faithful behind them so that their studies and initiatives are the subject of speculative thought only to the extent that they belong also the level of Christian experience' (Tavard, p. 109). The repudiation by the faithful of the agreements for restoring unity between the Latin and the Greek Church at Lyons in 1274 and Florence in 1439 is constantly in these writers' minds. And Paul Couturier spoke for many of his friends when he wrote: 'It is necessary that the whole Christian mass should be shaken by the universal prayer of Christians for unity, so that it experiences a fundamental shaking up which will destroy all prejudices, rectify points of view which are shortsighted or false, penetrate all hearts and in the end unify all minds in the eternal light of the one Christ' (Villain, p. 71). For him 'prayer for unity was conceived not only as a supplication but much more than that, as the total giving of one's life, whether one were Catholic or Protestant, for the sanctification of both' (Tavard, p. 125).

Fr Metzger similarly wrote much of the 'creative peace' which is the fruit of prayer. Such a peace is based on 'mutual respect of the churches for one another, mutual love of Christians and churches for one another, mutual exchange of the human and

spiritual values developed in the different confessions. The peace resulting from this triple attitude will be "creative", not of new beliefs, but of a new psychology: not of a new church but of a new demand for unity between churches' (see Tavard, pp. 125-27).

Roman Catholic participation in prayers for unity in the week January 18th to 25th is on a massive scale. The ecumenical significance of this prayer is however difficult to assess in as much as there are in fact two distinct observances—the Octave founded by the late Father Paul Wattson, which is oriented explicitly towards the return of dissidents to the Roman obedience, and the week of prayer nourished by the life work of Father Paul Couturier on the inclusive basis that our Lord would grant to his Church on earth unity in accordance with his will. The number of copies of the call to prayer issued by the latter movement to Roman Catholics, Orthodox, Anglicans and Protestants has increased every year—and the total is now well over half a million.

It is of course true that Roman Catholic ecumenists are for the most part pioneers—that they are often in considerable difficulties—and that there is much Roman Catholicism which is very different in outlook and spirit. There is no danger of nourishing false hopes of any early and easy reconciliation of Rome and Constantinople, Canterbury and Westminster. But there is nevertheless much to enlighten the mind and uplift the heart in the story of the ecumenical movement within the Church of Rome. Let me end with a quotation from Fr Villain's description of Paul Couturier's intention in saying the Mass for unity: 'He had an acute sense of the profound and fundamental unity of souls who belong to Christ by their baptism and in the sincerity of their desire, in spite of the diversity of their confessions, and he believed that a day would come—when God wills it and in the way in which he wills it—provided that all ask him for it—when this unity would be manifested visibly in the heart of a Church which had been renewed and which was truly universal' (Villain, p. 303).