

REVIEWS

THEOLOGY AND RELIGION

CHRETIENS DESUNIS, Principes d'un "Œcumenisme" Catholique. By M.-J. Congar, O.P. (*Unam Sanctam* Series, Editions du Cerf, Paris; 35 frs.)

In many quarters the Catholic who interests himself in the problems of the divisions of Christendom and the manner of their healing is still dismissed as an eccentric whose very loyalty and orthodoxy must *ipso facto* be regarded with suspicion. This, notwithstanding the injury which our divisions inflict on the mystical Christ, the irreparable loss which they impose on individual souls, the infidelity they involve to our mission to the world, the disastrous weakening and impoverishment which they cause to the One Church herself. Yet St. Thomas Aquinas has said, with his usual precision and caution, that of all the crimes committed against our neighbour (as distinguished from those committed directly against God Himself) that of schism "seems to be the greatest." (IIa IIae, xxxix, 2 ad 3.)

Perhaps one reason for the disrepute of the Catholic reunionist is the lack of hard-headedness and the excess of soft-heartedness and ill-informed sentimentality which, it is to be feared, has characterized too much enthusiasm for Christian reunion. Such concern as there has been among Catholics has suffered from a lack of sound and comprehensive theological leadership, as well as from a failure to grasp the historical, factual and psychological issues involved. In latter years, indeed, there have been many encouraging signs of an awakening of interest and understanding; but writings on the subject, excellent and truly constructive as many of them have been, have hitherto consisted almost solely of small and tentative essays and of monographs on particular points and aspects. In particular, the paramount necessity for a re-penetration of the theological and ecclesiological principles involved, and their application to the factual situation that confronts us, has been largely overlooked.

The enormous importance of Père Congar's book lies in the fact that here, we believe for the first time, is a really comprehensive and understanding study of that situation and a penetration of those theological and ecclesiological principles. He is at once courageous and cautious. Beginning with a careful analysis of the causes, developments and present characteristics of the divisions of Christendom, he passes to consideration

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of the nature and significance of the Church, her unity and catholicity, and then examines critically, but always sympathetically, various current non-Catholic views on the subject—"Ecumenicist," Anglican, Orthodox. Two final chapters deal in turn with the status, from the Catholic standpoint, of the various Christian communities and individuals that are separated from the See of Peter, and with a detailed and practical programme for a genuine and effective "Catholic ecumenicism." Valuable appendices includes a singularly balanced essay on the possibilities and prospects of an Anglican "corporate reunion" and the establishment of some form of Anglican uniaticism. Père Congar is severe, but hardly unjust, with "Father Jerome" for allowing his imagination to get the better of his theology.

The whole is achieved with immense skill and theological sagacity; and reveals an understanding of non-Catholic points of view and mentalities which is evidently at least as much the fruit of personal contact as of wide reading. Inevitably, in a book which covers so vast and largely unworked a field, there are points which the author may wish to present somewhat differently in later editions. His bold and almost harsh presentation of the damage which the divisions of Christendom have done within the Catholic Church herself (pp. 30 sqq.) might, for instance, be softened with consideration of the particular genius and universal applicability of the "Latin" usage and of the immense variety which it fosters, and of the role which divine providence may be presumed to play, thanks to the elasticity of the divine constitution of the Church itself, in the process of "centralization." And we wonder if his answer to the vitally important question *Que sont au regard de l'unique Eglise les chrétiens dissidents et les "églises" dissidents?*, packed with valuable matter as it is, might not be rendered a trifle less complicated. In this connexion, his very apposite criticism of the common misuse of the doctrine of the "Soul of the Church," as applied all too easily and uncomprehendingly to the position of non-Catholics in good faith, might well be amplified by a statement of its true and traditional meaning. Though Billot's admirable treatise *De Membris Ecclesiae* is referred to, perhaps more use might with advantage have been made of it, and in particular of the distinction between "membership of the visible Church" and "visible membership of the Church."

These are very minor and indeed disputable complaints. Père Congar has written a book which, if duly assimilated as it deserves and demands to be, may well mark a turning-point in the history of Christendom and contribute powerfully to the healing of the wounds of Christ's Body.

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