

Father Vincent McNabb — Pioneer Ecumenist

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Towards the end of his many sided life Fr Vincent wrote “God knows how much I have striven and prayed to mend the shattered unity of Christendom”, words that may seem strange to those who only knew him in his later days, for he had developed other interests. But a study of his writing shows him to have been among the early Catholic ecumenists and to have kept up his interest throughout his life. His labours in this field span the formative years of the movement which is one of the glories of the Church in this century. Indeed it is plain that he not only laboured but suffered in the cause of Reunion — as it was known, and sometimes dreaded by many of his contemporaries.

In retrospect he traced his interest to lessons learnt at his mother’s knee, where he acquired “his first desire, never since quenched of seeking to love, even more than to convert, his separated brethren”. The uphill path he trod not only shows that ecumenism did not begin with Vatican II but how he dealt with problems that are still with us. While Prior at Woodchester, in the first years of the century, he was in correspondence with Anglicans on both sides of the Atlantic. He was host to his Cotswold neighbour, the Rev Spencer Jones, Rector of Moreton-in-Marsh, who became a leading Anglo-Catholic after the publication of his classic *England and the Holy See*. He was also writing in the early issues of *The Lamp*, a paper edited by Fr Paul Wattson, who after his reconciliation was to promote the Unity Octave through it for almost half a century.

Some time earlier he had come under the gentle influence of the convert Bishop of Clifton, William Charles Brownlow, (1830-1901), whom he ranked among his “masters and heroes” and whose biography he was to write. After graduating at Trinity, Cambridge, and being ordained in 1835, Brownlow had been received by Newman at the Oratory. He proceeded to Rome, where he became a Dominican Tertiary thanks to Fr Thomas Burke O. P. He laboured in Plymouth before becoming the fourth bishop of Clifton in 1891. He kept many Anglican friendships and made others among Free Church men. While lecturing on the eve of the ruling on Anglican Orders he made the following characteristic statement.

“Even if this question were settled as our Anglican friends desire, there would still remain the wider difficulties to be faced. Heresy must be abjured and Schism be healed before a true unity

could take place. One thing our Anglican friends may be assured. No jealousy, or selfish feeling of personal dignity on the part of the Catholic Hierarchy will ever stand in the way of Reunion. Speaking for myself, I can say from my heart, that I should be too thankful to petition the Holy Father for permission to resign my see, to take down my canopy and throne from the Pro-Cathedral, and to lay my episcopal crozier at the feet of a Catholic Bishop of Bristol".¹

In this light it is interesting to find that almost the earliest writing of Fr Vincent was on Infallibility, a subject he was to return to frequently. His first article on Anglicanism was published in *The Dolphin*, May 1902, on the Oxford Movement. Shortly after he is writing in the *American Ecclesiastical Review* on the Romeward Movement in the Anglican Church. In 1905 he was among the first Catholics to address the newly founded Society of St Thomas of Canterbury dedicated to scholarly Anglican/Catholic dialogue. This unofficial body was launched by Spencer Jones and his inaugural paper *Rome and Reunion* printed in 1904. Limited to Anglicans, it nevertheless enjoyed the co-operation of leading Catholic scholars such as Gasquet, Chapman, Moyes, Benson, Pope, Fortescue, and even Belloc. The work spanned the years between *Apostolicae Curae* and Malines and produced many valuable papers, thus paving the way for the more official joint statements of today.

Vincent spoke for an hour and a half to about a hundred and fifty members on his chosen subject, Infallibility. After lunch, there followed two hours of close discussion. On returning home he wrote a lively description of his day at the old Holborn Town Hall which has been preserved. He was most impressed by the serious and thorough questions he was asked.

"The meeting was a private affair, not likely to be reported. The Anglican papers would not care to report it, as the movement it represents is not exactly to their liking . . . I feel my ignorance greatly. If only I had not wasted my time long ago I might have known much more about the early Church. I only hope I have not disgraced my 'Alma Mater'."²

During World War I Vincent was much in demand as a speaker on social questions, and often accused of being a socialist. He was untiring in work on behalf of refugees from Belgium, where he had studied theology. Among them was Dom Lambert Beaudouin OSB who was later to become famous as the founder of the monastery of Unity at Amay. It is interesting to speculate if the two met. Meanwhile he was also working closely with the community at Ditchling, influencing Eric Gill, Hilary Pepler, David Jones and many more.

His work for Reunion developed after the war, following the

Appeal to All Christian People issued by the 1920 Lambeth Conference. Fr Vincent was in touch with all the leading churchmen of the day: Cardinal Bourne and Archbishop Davidson, Cardinal Mercier and Lord Halifax, who thought so highly of him that he considered inviting him, or Fr Bede Jarrett, to join the conversations at Malines. But Fr Vincent's keenness was not seen in the same light by his own. *Blackfriars*, had been launched in 1920 with clear ecumenical intent and he wrote regularly in it. The fourth number contains an article by him on the Lambeth Conference which was favourably seen by the *Church Times* and waved in the course of a sermon by Bishop Gore. The paper was delated to Rome and the journal only avoided collapse by the narrow margin of advice given by Cardinal Gasquet.

Four years later there was another crisis. Fr Vincent wrote in praise of a pastoral letter of Cardinal Mercier on the Malines conversations. It was naturally approved by the Cardinal of Malines, but not by the Cardinal of Westminster. He forbade its printing and forbade its author to write about Reunion, which must have been a heavy cross. It was eventually printed after Bourne's death, in the *Dublin Review* of January 1939. Its fault lay in likening the spirit of Mercier to that of Cardinal Wiseman's neglected letter of 1841 on *Catholic Unity*.

It must be counted to Fr Vincent's credit that he bore his sentence without repining. The only difference it made was that he concentrated on Scriptural foundations in his writing. In 1928 he published a closely written *New Testament Witness to St Peter*. He sent a copy to Cardinal Bourne with a letter in which he describes it as "in more ways than appear the magnum opus of an ill-spent life" and went on to laud "Your Eminence's devotion to the Rock whence we in these islands were hewn". In conclusion, he asks for indulgence towards "a work wrought amidst all the din and noise of the Church's fighting trenches". A decade later he gathered together a score of articles written between 1902-36 in *The Church and Reunion*. These form the basis of the present essay, breathing as they do, an irenic spirit scarcely rivalled by his contemporaries. On the last page he describes himself as "perhaps an unrepresentative peace-lover who set himself a task, so ill-done, to cry Peace! Peace! whilst armies are in battle".

He had few illusions now, and soon the second world war was to engulf the nations again. However, not everything was lost. He spoke regularly at Hyde Park and in "the Hut" next to Westminster Cathedral almost to the end. It would be interesting to know how he viewed the upsurge of friendship provoked by the blitz, and whether he took part in the work of the Sword of the Spirit. He certainly worked with Archbishop Temple in the Public Morality Council. By now there were younger Dominicans writing on

Reunion in *Blackfriars*: Fr Victor White, Fr Henry St John and Fr Conrad Pepler. He seemed to concentrate on Jewish questions. Thus he spoke on the World Mission of the Jews during the Unity Week Conference at Oxford in 1942. But the following January, which was to be his last, he spoke there on what was central in his thinking: Scripture and Tradition and the Church. This summing-up of the study and reflection of a lifetime makes a wonderful coda to his apostolic achievement.

In October 1941 he had celebrated his golden jubilee and received many messages from clergy and laity in all the churches, but also from atheists and communists. The latter gave him most comfort, for they proved that his all-embracing heart had not laboured in vain. This note was struck by Fr Bernard Delaney O.P. when he preached his panegyric. After describing Fr Vincent's "ready sympathy with those who work and pray for the Unity of Christendom, his tender charity towards Anglicans and non-Conformists, his work among Jews, and his friendly relations among agnostics and atheists" he concluded by thanking God for "a great Friar Preacher, and something more, a living sermon" and suggested that when the Catholic Evidence Guild is given a patron it might be such a one as he, "for his summons was to the whole world".

1 This irenic note was to be struck once again in 1924 with heightened authority by Cardinal Bourne in his pastoral letter for Lent, which is often overlooked. It was written in the tense days of the Malines conversations "How little do the writers of such things realise what we feel with regard to the restoration of England to the Unity of Christendom – how there is no sacrifice of place or position that we are not prepared to make in order to achieve that great end – how there is not a Bishop among us who would not gladly resign his see and retire to complete obscurity if thereby England could again be Catholic".

2 F. Valentine. *Father Vincent McNabb O.P.* p. 107.