

Ecumenical Studies

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A Catholic, whose interest in the movement for Christian unity urges him to make ecumenical contacts with other Christians amongst whom he lives, will find himself, at least in town and city areas, confronted by Presbyterians, by Methodists, Congregationalists and Baptists, and with a certain dominance of prestige by Anglicans. For his encounter a Catholic ecumenist will want to know about some if not all of these differing religious bodies; what sort of people are they, what divides them from each other, on what are they agreed? He will probably need knowledge to supplement his vague ideas of their history and how they came into being. He will be interested in their antecedent presuppositions, but still more in what are their aspirations, hopes, doubts and fears today concerning the prospect of future unity; its possibility, the changes it would involve and its dangers.

The *Star Books on Reunion*¹ a series of six inexpensive paperbacks on unity as Anglicans, Presbyterians, Methodists, Congregationalists, Baptists and Roman Catholics see it, contains the substance of this information in accessible and readable form. It is a pity that a seventh volume, on the Eastern Orthodox, was not included in the series, for full understanding of unity problems, especially the theological ones, requires the witness of these ancient churches. The authors are well chosen, highly qualified, theologically and pastorally, to represent the position of their respective communions. All of them share common ground in their conviction of the paramount importance of the ecumenical approach between Christians. They follow a kind of plan in that each was asked, by the general editor, Dr Oliver Tompkins, bishop of Bristol, to read John Lawrence's *The Hard Facts of Unity*², and

¹Star Books on Reunion, General Editor The Bishop of Bristol. Mowbray, 1962. 5s. 6d. each.

Roman Catholics and Unity, Enda McDonagh; *Anglicans and Unity*, David M. Paton; *Presbyterians and Unity*, J. K. S. Reid, D.D.; *Congregationalists and Unity*, Erik Routley, D.Phil.; *Baptists and Unity*, L. G. Champion, D.Th.; *Methodists and Unity*, Rupert E. Davies.

²*The Hard Facts of Unity*, John Lawrence; S.C.M., 1961. John Lawrence is an Anglican and Editor of *Frontier*. A Catholic ecumenist beginning his studies would do well to read this perceptive little book too.

to use it as a common point of reference. Together these authors certainly show with admirable balance and clarity the intractable problems and tensions ecumenism in this country is faced with.

Of *Roman Catholics and Unity*, by Dr Enda McDonagh of Maynooth, it would be difficult to speak too highly. He states the principles of Catholic ecumenism in clear terms, carefully distinguishing the essential from the inessential in the life of the Church; he shows how in controversy it has been possible for current Catholic teaching to be put out of focus by overemphasis on what is attacked, leading to neglect of what is in fact matter for agreement. At a number of points misapprehension, on both sides, could be dissipated and a better balance secured by eirenic discussion. In his assessment of the teaching of other Christians Dr McDonagh has a true ecumenical insight. On Catholics he urges the magnitude and extent of our ecumenical obligations. But limitations of space do not allow of his giving detailed guidance to his Catholic readers in the application of principles to the divergences within Protestantism itself. The other books in the series all envisage the achievement of unity among Protestants as a priority, before the ground can be sufficiently prepared for the wider unity that lies beyond it. At the same time it is clearly of the first importance what form such a preparatory unity would take. This question is the concern of the present article.

In the final paragraph of *The Hard Facts of Unity* John Lawrence has written these words. 'God is calling his people to move steadily towards that unity which is his will for them. He has not yet shown us the end of the road and we do not yet need to know it, but he shows us the direction and he shows us the next step. He has placed within our grasp the attainment, within the next twenty years, of the visible unity throughout the world of the greater part of those Churches that went through the Reformation. This would prepare the way for the wider unity of all God's people'³. Those are words of insight. Every Christian sees what lies at the end of the road to unity as a united Church with some sort of organic structure in accordance with God's will. Many Christians however, Orthodox and Catholics in particular, hold that the Church has an essential divinely ordained structure; they know therefore what the substance of the structure of a united Church would be, because it is already given and existing. Its basis is episcopacy, embodied in apostolic succession.

What we do not know or need to know is how the final unity will

³*op. cit.* p. 118.

come about, and what will be the details of the new shape its basic structure will acquire. It may be as different and varied in the future as it has been in the past. What we do need to know is what *our* next step is to be, and *that* God will show us, through our consciences under the guidance of the Church. This of course is for us the importance of the Vatican Council and its future directives. But we must bear in mind that others are taking steps towards unity, placing their initiatives in the hands of God and following the guidance of conscience. At first sight we may be inclined to think of some of these initiatives as retrograde steps. But we must remember to make our judgments on the presuppositions of those others not on ours. It is their consciences that are concerned. A classical instance of such an initiative is the making of the Church of South India. After long and often delicate negotiations, five dioceses of the Anglican Communion in South India, together with the Methodist, Presbyterian and Congregational Churches, achieved organic unity as the C.S.I. in January 1943.

The chief difficulty in this process was the adoption of the institution of episcopacy by the three non-episcopal churches. A solution was finally arrived at by which the C.S.I. should have episcopal government, the existing five Anglican bishops consecrating fourteen new ones, and all future consecrations and ordinations are to be episcopal. The first thirty years was to be regarded as a transitional period, during which the hitherto separate communions, retaining their non-episcopal ministries should grow together by working together in unity. By 1973 it is hoped that a unity in faith and order will be achieved similar to that of the episcopal Churches which make up the Anglican communion. The C.S.I. is now on the road to successful accomplishment of this and the institution of episcopacy is firmly rooted in its continuing life.⁴ It has become a model for other schemes of union on similar but not identical lines between Anglican and non-episcopal Churches elsewhere.

It is not generally realized that before the South India scheme was thought of extensive organic unions were taking place under ecumenical inspiration, all over the world between Protestant non-episcopal Churches on non-episcopal lines. Between 1910 and 1952 there have been thirty-four such unions or mergers, the numbers of Churches

⁴For a measured and dispassionate assessment of the place and vocation of the C.S.I. in the movement towards reunion, by a Catholic theologian, see the article by Père Louis Bouyer in *Istina*, 1955, 2, p. 215.

included in each of them varying from three to eleven.⁵ There are a number of others still in process of formation. This is the first stage of the movement towards unity. Amongst these are a few groups pioneered by C.S.I. which have gone forward to the second stage, though with variations of method. These organic unions are adopting under Anglican aegis the institution of episcopacy and each of them includes a Church of the Anglican communion or a group of Anglican dioceses. Together with these in these unions are other Churches previously non-episcopal, yet still in communion with their non-episcopal parent bodies. By this slow process of evolution it is hoped that the institution of episcopacy will eventually spread throughout world Protestantism.

It is true of course that the episcopacy thus introduced is the institution only in its external aspect, it lacks validity, the inner reality of sacramental grace. Yet it is a venerable institution capable of providing a framework of Church government and pastoral care in line with the highest ideals of historic Christendom. It would be capable too, if unity of faith were attained, of receiving back again the fullness of its sacramental character. Anglo-Catholicism alone in the Church of England supports unequivocally apostolic succession and its sacramental implications as necessary *jure divino* and of the *esse* and not merely the *bene esse* of the Church. Yet Anglicans as a whole, whether central or evangelical, though parting company with Anglo-Catholics on this issue and recognizing the validity of non-episcopal ministries are yet deeply wedded in loyalty to the institution of episcopacy. They support it as historic and because it has always been basic to the structure of Anglicanism; for the most part they are prepared to demand its retention in all reunion negotiations.⁶

For this reason there is a strong and growing tendency amongst Anglo-Catholics to admit accommodations in these negotiations, which in their view are anomalous and involve grave irregularity. This is conceded, not without uneasiness in the minds of many, for the sake of building up unity in proposed unions with non-episcopal Churches. The Historic Episcopate is made a *sine qua non* condition, but without insistence on its claim to dominical institution and consequent necessity

⁵Statistics will be found in *A History of the Ecumenical Movement*, Rouse and Neill, S.P.C.K., 1954, Appendix to chapter 10, p. 496.

⁶For differing Anglican views on this question see *The Apostolic Ministry*, ed. K. E. Kirk, Hodder and Stoughton. *The Recovery of Unity*, E. L. Mascall, Longmans, 1958 (Anglo-Catholic). *Old Priest and New Presbyter*, Norman Sykes, C.U.P., 1956. *Christian Unity - The Anglican Position*, G. K. A. Bell, Hodder and Stoughton, 1948 (Central Anglican).

as a part of the essential structure of the Church. The justification for this is the sheer urgency of the need for unity, and the belief that God is blessing the C.S.I. in its development. Added to this is the hope that in process of time, by growing together more closely into the unity thus initiated, all the uniting Churches may be led by the Holy Spirit to reach a common mind about its necessity according to Christ's will and ordinance for the Life of his Church.⁷

This common mind was destroyed by the Reformation. The statement can be made without prejudice to any view about the rights and wrongs of the Reformation itself. The revolt of Luther and his reforming followers was in the first instance against the Papacy, but it ended by the rejection of any corporate teaching authority in the Church for interpreting the data of the biblical revelation. This resulted in the rejection of the authority of the apostolic succession of bishops, as antiquity has consistently understood it at least from the sub-apostolic age. The authority of the Apostolic see was integral to apostolic succession and came in the course of history to be increasingly recognized as the decisive element in it. For it was substituted by Luther's doctrine of *sola Scriptura* the direct interpretation of the biblical data by the individual Christian conscience. This basic conviction unites the authors of the *Star Books* on the Churches of the Reformation, with some qualification however from the Anglican side. It involves, however, the implication that the Church Christ founded was guilty, almost in its origins, of an apostasy from his mind of tremendous magnitude. Yet during the centuries of Christological controversy history shows the Church mediating to the Christian conscience authoritative interpretations of the Word of God in the Scriptures and condemning those who refused to accept its authority. Had it not done so, especially perhaps during the dominance of Arianism, it is questionable to what extent belief in Christ's divinity and therefore in true Christianity would have survived.

Owing to the events of the Reformation Christendom today faces a dilemma of choice between two opposing conceptions of the authority of the gospel of Christ. Historic Christendom holds that the scriptures

⁷See *The Church of South India and the Church*, by Donald Rea, Baxters Press, Oxford, 1956. A justification by an Anglican Papalist of acceptance of the measures taken in setting up the C.S.I. in view of the urgency of the need for unity. He pleads the necessity of economy and tolerance, and the Catholicizing tendency of the C.S.I. *The Household of God*, by Dr Leslie Newbigin, once a Presbyterian minister and subsequently one of the bishops of C.S.I. throws much light on this tendency.

are interpreted to faith within the Believing Community.⁸ This interpretation is the product of the insights of faith in prayer, worship and study, aided by critical scholarship, on the part of its members, all in the context of a common witness to the faith, which is thus the responsibility of the whole community, under the guidance of the Holy Spirit. Above this common responsibility of all the baptised is the responsibility of guidance and government entrusted to the mediating authority of the episcopate, apostolically commissioned and safeguarded from error in their united teaching of the faith by a special gift of God's overruling providence.

The Reformation tradition also holds that the Scriptures are interpreted to faith within the believing community, in the way described above. But the mediating authority of the apostolic episcopate is rejected and the individual conscience is regarded as the supreme and sole authority. The only safeguard from error is the scriptures themselves and the faith of the individual. All corporate guidance, which of course exists by necessity in any believing community, is subject to conscience and conscience, in theory at least, is not bound by it. This is the dilemma confronting Christendom today, and this dilemma solved there would remain, in the domain of authority, only the divergence between East and West concerning the Papacy. Does the Apostolic See of Rome hold *jure divino* within the universal episcopate the final and decisive responsibility of decision in matters of faith, and the corresponding jurisdictional responsibility that matters of faith engender? Or is that See simply *primus inter pares*? This is a question of great difficulty in present circumstances, but it is not a dilemma; these two conceptions would not be wholly incompatible were more emphasis allowed on the meaning of *primus* and rather less on that of *pares*.

The dilemma of Historic Christendom and the Reformation has a further difficulty. If Church authority is a Tradition reflecting by divine disposition the mind of Christ in the corporate mind of his members, the Believing community, that community will of necessity be an organic society undivided by God's decree, in spite of human defectibility. It is only because of its organic unity that its tradition can give corporate and united witness to its own nature and function, or to the content and certainty of the gospel it proclaims. When Church authority

⁸'Only in the Church, with its living experience of the Holy Spirit, can the Bible be understood in its wholeness. In this sense the Church knows more than the bare written text of scripture'. Dr George Florovsky, the Orthodox theologian, quoted in *The Old and New in the Church*, S.C.M., 1961, p. 21.

resides only in the consciences of the individual members of a believing community it is virtually inevitable that such a community should fall into error and become divided. There can be no corporate guarantee of immunity from error if there is no finally decisive intermediary between God and the human conscience.

The deadlock between Historic Christendom and the Reformation seems complete. There are however causes for hope, they show themselves at numerous points in the slow course of ecumenical evolution. Notable amongst them is the development of catholicizing movements in a number of dissident Churches, both at home and on the continent. Outstanding amongst these is the Anglo-Catholic movement profoundly influenced by Catholicism, and its influence in turn on the Church of England as a whole and the equally profound influence of the Church of England in the World Council of Churches. Coupled with this is the growth and intensification of sacramental ideas in many directions owing to the presence of Orthodox and Anglicans together in the work of the Faith and Order Commission. There is an increasing tendency to emphasize the Eucharist or Lord's Supper as central to Christian worship in many widely differing allegiances; a demand for episcopacy on Catholic lines in some of the Lutheran Churches; a growing desire for religious life organized under vows, as in the famous Taizé community; and an increased respect for celibacy.

By slow degrees, at varying paces, bit by bit in differing areas and directions, world Protestantism seems to be moving into a line of development which is increasingly catholicizing. Huge sections of it are still untouched, there is an immense way yet to go, and many obstacles to overcome. But with God all things are possible; it is not we, but he, who changes men's hearts and minds. Under his guiding providence the Church of England, itself most largely affected by catholicizing influences, is taking a pioneering lead by assisting in the restoration of the outward framework of episcopacy, which may one day prove a foundation on which can be built the full sacramental reality and authority of apostolic succession. Some words of Dr Rupert Davies in *Methodists and Unity* are significant. He says 'Reunion conversations between Anglicans and Methodists, both official and unofficial, tend to be dominated by one theme: the historic episcopacy. This has in fact become almost an obsession with union negotiations in every continent, for it is well known that everything depends on it in the end'.⁹

⁹*op. cit.*, p. 55. He goes on to plead that it should not be wrenched from its context, but should be examined in the context of the whole doctrine of the Church.

What is the Catholic contribution to be? From one point of view we have to stand aside and watch while actual organic unity continues to make progress within Protestantism. From another, in company with the Eastern Churches, we hold a key position. We must make every effort to increase both our prayer and our encounter and dialogue with other Christians, at both individual and corporate levels. What is open to us to do will become more clear when the Council has finished its deliberations and its decisions and directives have been published for our study, assimilation and action.

I reproduce here a list of the principal points given in Rome by the Melkite Patriarch Maximos IV of Antioch as likely to be brought before the Council.¹⁰ Patriarch Maximos is a member of the Commission for the Eastern Churches.

A better definition of the divine origin of the episcopate and its powers.

Greater disciplinary autonomy for the Eastern Churches.

A re-valuation of the role of patriarch within Catholicism.

The use of living languages in the Liturgy.

Unity about the date of Easter.

Creation within the Holy See's central administration of a permanent body dealing with ecumenical problems.

Decentralization of the Church's administration.

Revival of the diaconate.

Bringing the Eastern catholic rites into missionary work especially in N. Africa, Ethiopia and India.

A bigger role for the laity in the church, not for their sanctification only but to make them real co-workers in the Christianization of the world.

These points represent what an Eastern rite Catholic bishop, speaking with considerable authority, considers to be needed from the Council to further the restoration of unity between East and West. If by a change of mind and heart East and West could present a united front to the rest of the Christian world on the apostolic authority of the Church's teaching magisterium considerable stimulus would be given to what must be a change of the same kind on the part of the Reformation Churches. We add therefore a few further points which we may reasonably hope will be brought before the Council. These, apart from the first two, look mainly to the situation in the West, though they all

¹⁰Quoted in *Chrysostom*, Quarterly Bulletin of the Society of St John Chrysostom, Winter 1962-63, p. 2.

have implications also for the East.

That the Council should take steps to relate the decrees of Vatican I on Papal primacy and infallibility, which are of course *de fide*, to Patriarch Maximos' first point.

To elucidate the relation of Tradition to Scripture, and to give the two main views concerning it *at least* an equal status, if a more explicit decision is inexpedient.¹¹

To insist that in teaching on faith, the primary emphasis should be that it is a divine initiative leading to encounter with the living God, through Christ in his incarnate life and in the Church his Body. The acceptance of propositions about this encounter and what follows from it is a necessary, important but secondary element in faith, not to be allowed to obscure what is primary, but to be used to enhance its vital necessity.¹²

To state the Church's principles on the supremacy and freedom of conscience in such a way as to increase good relations between separated Christians and the Church.¹³

To provide an extended use of the Scriptures in the vernacular at public Masses, at least on Sundays.

To make provision for serious biblical preaching for the expounding of these Scriptures to the people.

In the Introduction to the *Star Books on Reunion* printed at the beginning of each of them, the editor Dr Oliver Tompkins, an expert in things ecumenical writes these words which Catholics can certainly make their own:

'Humanly speaking, the goal of Christian unity is ludicrously impracticable. But God never commands the impossible. We believe that unity is His command, and that in our time He is giving to us the encouragement of seeing things happen which our fathers would have considered impossible. It is in that faith that these contributions are offered. God is leaving us in no doubt that the world which He has made is ineluctably *one* world. Within it, at the place where reconciliation is proclaimed, we must not be divided'.

¹¹See *The Spirit and Forms of Protestantism*, by Louis Bouyer, Harvill Press, 1956, Ch. VI, The Sovereign Authority of Scripture.

¹²See *The Study of Theology*, by Charles Davis, Sheed and Ward, 1962, ch. IX, The Christian Mystery and the Trinity.

¹³For an excellent and comprehensive survey of this problem see *Christian Unity*, Lectures of the Maynooth Summer School 1961, ed. McNamara, Furrow Trust, 1962; *Religious Freedom and the State*, by Dr Enda McDonagh.