

THE WEEK OF PRAYER FOR CHRISTIAN UNITY

The Week of Prayer for Christian Unity should be regarded as complementary, and certainly not as opposed, to the Church Unity Octave. The Octave has among Anglicans come to be associated, whether rightly or wrongly, with the holding of certain doctrinal positions and therefore many who desire unity, and devoutly pray for it, have felt bound to hold aloof from the prayer thus organised. One might regret their decision, but mere regret would be no remedy for the situation and a remedy was necessary if the prayer was indeed to become universal. It was also desirable that from a movement which was purely eirenic in intention, all possible points of controversy should be removed.

A remedy was fortunately at hand. The work of the Abbé Paul Couturier of Lyons was already well-known in this country and the Abbé himself had paid visits here in 1937 and 1938. Père Couturier was the driving power of the '*Semaine de l'Universelle Prière des Chrétiens pour l'Unité chrétienne*' wherein the movement of prayer for unity was released from any controversial doctrinal requirement and centred wholly in the prayer for unity of our Lord. He had appealed, with extraordinary success, to Christians of all denominations to join in this prayer and all found themselves able to do so without controversy or violation of conscience. The basis of this prayer, and its expression, is best stated in the Abbé's own words :

'When and how will unity be brought about? What are the obstacles to be overcome? This is Thy business, my faith can only bid me pray with Thee, in Thee, that Thy unity may be accomplished, that unity which Thou hast never ceased to desire, which Thou pursuest, and art preparing, which Thou wouldest long since have realised, if all men with me had been as a crystal between that part of creation which wishes to rise to Thee through the Christian and that part of Thee which wishes to descend to the world by the same agency of the Christian.

'This formula of prayer is simple and loyal. It is a meeting point, where, under the banner of charity, the prayers for unity of all the true sons of Love, of all true Christians, though they be separated, can flow together into the Heart of Christ.'¹

¹ *The Universal Prayer of Christians for Christian Unity*, p. 12.

This is the basis upon which the Superiors of the Anglican Religious Communities for men issued, in November, 1939, their appeal for a Week of Prayer for Christian Unity to be observed parallel with the Church Unity Octave. The results have been encouraging and the Week has been observed by Archbishops and Bishops, by priests and laity throughout the whole Anglican Communion, as well as by a number of Free Churchmen. Further than this, the great Faith and Order Movement, which formerly observed a week of prayer for unity at Pentecost, in 1942 changed its dates to coincide with the great act of intercession being made during January. Thus it has come about that during this week of January the whole Christian world bows under the almighty hand of God to implore that His will be done.

Père Couturier lays great stress upon this simultaneity and he sets out his conception thus : ' My prayer for unity comes from my heart, filters through the circulation of the Mystical Body into my Brother's prayer though he may be far removed from me by the content of his beliefs. But if he be nearer to God than I, it is in his prayer that my poor prayer will find its best effect, its most rapid flight to the Eternal. It will not be necessary to say " I pray for so and so. I pray for another, an unknown." It will be more important to say, " I let the other pray in me : I open to him with love the path of my soul : may the way of my prayer be free to him ; *via orationis*. So at the altar, in the Holy Mass, at the Choir Office, in silent prayer, with me and in me pray my brothers, Protestants, Anglican, Orthodox. And, just as truly, I am and I pass into the loyal and sincere prayer of the Divine Liturgy and the Offices of convinced Orthodox believers, into the public and private prayer of fervent Anglicans, into the fervent Protestant commemorations of the Holy Supper "' (*Ibid.* p. 17).

The conception of prayer here set forth is truly oecumenical for its potentiality is not merely of geographical universality, but also of universality of content and application. It passes far beyond services of united prayer or worship and becomes the united heart-cry of the whole divided Christendom. It is not possible for Christians of all denominations to unite themselves locally to pray for unity, since the Roman Church and a considerable section of the Anglican Church consider such local uniting inopportune and wrong, but it is hereby possible for them all to be united temporally and spiritually in prayer and in bonds of close unity. To all is the prayer natural : '*Fiat voluntas tua, sicut in coelo, et in terra . . . ut omnes unum sint,*' to all it is self-sufficient and inclusive.

It is impossible to write of unity at this time without referring to

the relation of our prayer for it to the task of building the post-war world. It is no mere rhetorical question to ask what is to happen to post-war Europe if all that can guide it in Christian paths, all that can build the 'brave new world,' is the weak and sect-torn Christendom which was too weak to avert the catastrophe. If those prophets and philosophers—by no means the least of whom is Nicholas Berdiaeff—who have long been foretelling the death of the present era, be right, what of that new era to which the death of the old must give birth? Are the shattered cities of Europe, or the interminable trials of war criminals, to be the types of the new 'Christian' civilization? Christian unity has never been a mere ideal, for our Lord was never a mere Idealist, but it has never perhaps been seen to be a matter of such hard and practical politics. For if it be true that the supra-natural unity of mankind be founded upon the natural, then it is equally true that the natural is founded upon the supra-natural and if the one is to be visibly expressed then so must the other be. But we may go further than this; we may go to the Praying Christ of the High Priestly prayer. It may be that man cannot attain to the divine coinherence of the Blessed Trinity in all its fulness, but man can and the Christian must, build his relations upon the basis of that coinherence: *Ut sint unum, sicut et nos unum sumus*. This is particularly relevant to the problems of peace. It is demonstrably untrue to say that Christians will not fight one another; it is demonstrably untrue to say that members of the One Church will not fight one another. But this means no more than that the unity has not been absolute in the entirety of its manifestations; that the whole of Christendom has fallen below the total ideal of unity expressed by our Lord. This total unity is the union of the heart of man with the Heart of the Eternal and of it the outward unity of the Church is the sacramental.

What we seek is the extension in all the world of the *Corpus Christi Mysticum*; the extension of a unity which 'was in the beginning with God.' It cannot be a mere fellowship although our corporeity may express itself in the world largely in terms of fellowship. It cannot even be expressed as a complete agreement on all points of doctrine and order, although such must be included within it. It must, in fact, be no less than Christendom living as one *homo sanctus*. If it be less than that it will partake of the nature of a man-made corporation which will inevitably collapse. One of the major faults of the vast literature of reunion is that the problem is so consistently viewed and stated in terms of the temporal rather than in terms of the eternal. The inevitable outcome of such a tendency is to make that literature mainly polemical and

the attitude of its writers and readers that of participants in a quarrel. The unity must be one of heart, will, love and desire as well as a unity of doctrine and order if it is not to be less than the unity envisaged by Christ. The Church is to be no less a unity than that which binds the Father and the Son and such unity is guaranteed in the work of God the Holy Ghost for, although the Church may clothe herself in the forms of the world in her historic existence, yet her nature and being are of the eternal. To say that the Church takes the forms of the world is not to say that she is conditioned by them for the Church is before all ages and the world, as Hermas in *The Shepherd* (*Vision II, c.IV.*) puts it, was made for the Church. 'The Church is not a reality existing side by side with others,' says Berdiaeff, 'it is not an element in the universal and historic whole; it is not a separated objective reality. The Church is all; it constitutes the whole plenitude of being, of the life of humanity, and of the world in a state of Christianization. It possesses a cosmic nature and to forget this means decadence' (*Freedom and the Spirit*, p.331).

Thus we return to our point of departure; Christendom's prayer for unity. Prayer alone can meet the conditions, but the prayer must be Christ's prayer, not our own; it must be Christ praying in us and not we praying of our solitary selves. Our prayer, indeed, is less personal invocation than response to the everlasting prayer of the High Priest. And as we pray so shall we begin to be, for we are divided yet united. The spiritual unity of Christendom is a fact of the theology of Baptism. In a sense, therefore, the problem of re-union ceases to exist and in its place arises the problem of clothing with the mystical flesh of Christ's Body the Church an already united soul. As regards outward politics the new problem is no easier of solution than the old, but the shifting of emphasis from the healing of a breach to the clothing of an imperfect and half-conceived unity is an essential step to eirenic prayer.

'The unity of the Church means nothing less than universal brotherhood through identification with the Son of God, whereby God becomes our Father in the unifying life of the Spirit of love,' says Father Victor White in an important and immensely encouraging paper², 'So the Apostle bids us pray for *all* men, for this is good and acceptable in the sight of God our Saviour, who will have *all* men to be saved and come to the knowledge of the truth.'

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² *Report of the Proceedings at the Church Unity Octave held at Blackfriars, Oxford, 1942, p. 10.*