

COMMENT

The report that a meeting has taken place between the thirteen Roman Catholic and Anglican bishops of the Greater London area and that they have pledged themselves to work together more closely in future in 'matters of common concern' besides being extremely welcome provides an occasion for bringing up once more a proposal we first put forward on this page some years ago.

There are a great many practical matters of christian concern—London's housing problem, the combatting of racism, educational projects and so forth—on which Anglicans and Catholics as well as other Christians may usefully work together. They will want to cooperate with non-Christians too, of course, but the christian Churches have so much in common both in motivation and in institutional structure that they can usefully form a single bloc for such work. Inter-church co-operation, however, ought not to stop simply at good works; the matters of common concern include preaching the gospel and the celebration of christian life.

It is here that the snags begin to arise. Evidently if there were in any simple sense a common preaching of the gospel there would not be any separated churches. It will be a long time before such common preaching could be organised on a regular basis. There can be and are friendly exchanges of pulpits at appropriate times, and such activities have gone a long way to show unsuspected common ground between the churches, but of course there remain differences in extremely important areas. A preaching that restricted itself to what the churches have in common would not be useless but it would be even less gripping than most of it is already. This is an area in which progress towards unity (if that is what we are making) can only be hesitant and piecemeal.

When we turn to the sacramental celebration of the life of grace we enter an even more delicate and complex field, partly because the sacraments are so much more obviously official, so much more obviously a matter of the whole community, than is preaching. One form of simplification is Dr Coggan's proposal for immediate inter-communion; This, surely rightly, was set aside by the Pope. It would be a piece of wishful thinking, a liturgical pretence that the community of faith and charity we seek has already been found. Our separate eucharistic celebrations are indeed a sign of the sin of the church, the sin of division, but if they are recognised as a confession of sin they may yet be part of the process of reconciliation. To gloss over difference is no more innocent in matters of Church order than it is in theology.

The obverse simplification is one which would outlaw inter-

communion altogether. Clearly there are objections to an official sanctioning of general intercommunion which would not hold against a private and occasional celebration. To put it at its mildest, it is hard to imagine that many Roman Catholic priests in this country would refuse communion to any christian who approached the altar, but that is a different thing from encouraging the practice of making it an official policy, while the question of Catholics receiving communion in other churches is another matter altogether.

But the bedrock basis of christian unity, is, after all, baptism. Here is something about which the thirteen Catholic and Anglican bishops are in complete agreement doctrinally and liturgically. None of the objections to intercommunion could apply to a shared and common baptism. Instead of ineffectual calls for institutional unity where agreement is in some doubt, as with the eucharist, let us have official visible public unity where we are all obviously agreed, with baptism.

We should set aside buildings specifically as baptistries—if we cannot afford to build new ones there are plenty of redundant churches in London that could be converted to this use. Ideally baptism would be regularly celebrated there by a rota of ministers from the neighbouring christian churches, making no distinction between them, so that the child of Roman Catholic parents might be baptised by a Methodist or Anglican minister and vice versa. If this is judged to be too violent a change, a small beginning would be made if even the different churches at least shared the same physical baptismal font and used the same liturgy. Similarly a single common baptismal register for all churches would be an evident symbol of the established christian unity from which we start. When the baptistries became going concerns they would inevitably become centres of catechesis and we might expect that in this elementary teaching, solutions might begin to be found to the problems of a joint preaching of the gospel.

Anyway, the London bishops have announced that there will be future joint meetings; may we respectfully submit this proposal for their agenda.

H.McC.