

UNITY AND THE EASTERN CHURCHES

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DURING these last decades the problem of Christian disunity has imposed itself on the conscience of Christians as an immediate challenge and there have been many attempts to find a solution. All Christians, whatever their ecclesiastical allegiance, affirm belief in 'one, holy, catholic and apostolic Church', and although no mark of the Church could exist independently of the others, it is natural to seek the answer to the problem raised by Christian disunity first in terms of the note of uniqueness.

We could divide Christians into two groups: those who believe that the note of one-ness is already fully exemplified in their own Church, as is the case with Catholics and with Orthodox Christians; and those who represent various Protestant traditions and who, while affirming belief in 'one Church', also believe that the unity of the Church has to be re-asserted and made manifest because the visible unity has been destroyed by divisions among Christians which have come about since the first centuries A.D.

In one sense there is 'no problem' for the former group, except the practical problem of convincing other Christians to agree with them. The feeling that there is 'no problem' leads to an appearance of barrenness in work for Christian unity approached from this standpoint, and has prevented any widespread sympathy for the ecumenical movement, which has grown up principally in a Protestant *milieu*. It has also obscured the need to feel concerned about the fact of Christian division and the obligation to do something about it.

Actually, however, the 'no problem' solution is illusory. It is only true in so far as it answers the wrong question. For those who start from the premise that the unique Church exists undivided as a visible historical entity, the relevant question turns on the relationship of baptized Christians to the Church whose claims they repudiate. The Catholic doctrine of the mystical body of Christ has encouraged a new approach to the study of the significance of membership of the Church, and the literature associated with such studies shows how remarkably the horizons

of ecclesiology have been extended in consequence. And this has been achieved without loss of dogmatic coherence, but on the contrary, it has brought a deeper understanding of the relationship 'Christ, the Christian, and the Church'.

This is a more potentially fruitful approach to the question of Christian disunity than what one might call the head-on collision approach with non-Catholics over the note of unity. Perhaps this is because its direct bearing is not on unity as such but on the *catholicity* of the Church. The practical sense of the word 'catholic' is simply 'for all'. Just as Christ came to bring salvation to all, and not only to the Jewish people, so the Church is for all and not for some particular people or nations. But there is a further spiritual significance. Christ's mission was for all men, but also, as St Paul says, Christ is the fulness of this potential all-ness. 'For in him it hath pleased the Father that all the fulness should dwell, and through him to reconcile all things to himself' (Col. i, 19-20). So the Church is properly Catholic not only in the sense of 'for all', that is in so far as the Church offers salvation to all men, but *catholicity* here implies also the fulness of Christ, the 'supreme head to the Church, which is his body, the fulness of him who is wholly fulfilled in all' (Eph. i, 22, 23).

In a historical sense this fulness which is in Christ is to be realized progressively in time until all things are subject to Christ 'that God may be all in all' (I Cor. xv, 28). The missionary work of the Church has always been inspired by this ideal of the kingship of Christ. But in recent times our vision of this kingship has been focussed to include not only men and women of all nations individually, but also corporately as expressed through distinctive historical and cultural groups, such as are to be found, for instance, in India and China. One of the most characteristic features of creation is its manifold variety in species as well as individuals. Through this variety, creation as a whole is enabled to glorify God more perfectly. Variety as found in different human societies or cultures is legitimate in so far as it glorifies God and is a mode in which God is worshipped. In Christ all creation and all human society is to be brought to pay homage to God, and we have come to recognize that differing human societies belong to the pattern of God's providence.

It is easier to see this aspect of catholicity in the mission fields of Asia and Africa than nearer home, but it has a bearing also

on the problem of Christian disunity. Since the great schism in the eleventh century, when the eastern Orthodox Churches became separated from Rome, the Catholic Church has come to be identified very largely with one social and cultural group, that of the people for whom Latin is the liturgical medium and who represent the core of western European civilization. So complete has been this break with eastern Christianity that Latin scholars feel more at home with the classical philosophy of pagan Greece than with the Greek liturgy of eastern Christians. Few Catholics remember, if indeed they have ever been taught, that for the first centuries Roman Christians celebrated the holy eucharist in Greek, and that the introduction of Latin in its place was the first concession to the 'vernacular movement'.

The Orthodox Churches, after the schism with Rome, found themselves in a different situation. Although the Byzantine era has left its stamp on Orthodox ceremonial and architecture, the Orthodox communities represent a variety of different language and cultural groups, including Arab, Greek and Slavonic and this variety has found expression also in their worship. Having rejected the primacy of the bishop of Rome, the Orthodox kept together on the basis of a somewhat flexible system of autocephalous and autonomous Churches, bound ultimately in obedience to the General Councils. The *ethos* of worship and spirituality of eastern Christians, which gives perhaps more explicit recognition to God as *Creator* and his sovereignty over all creation than is to be found in the Latin medieval heritage, readily accommodates the concept of the catholicity of the Church as the fulness of all things gathered up in Christ.

The figure of Christ as the *Pantokrator*, the Lord of Lords and King of Kings, which embraces the worshipping community from the dome of Byzantine-style churches, is a reminder that not only does all human authority derive from his sovereignty but also that he is the direct Lord and King of all human social groups and nations.

Two other characteristic aspects of eastern devotion also contribute to this interpretation of catholicity. There is a very marked 'family' sense about the worshipping community and a strong popular devotion to the saints, especially to the blessed Virgin, Mother of God. This family sense of each congregation is reflected first in the concept of the nation as a family, and by

analogy, transferred to other nations as also being distinctive families. Both these characteristics contribute to an intimate link between Church and national life, and this link has proved a great bulwark for the Orthodox Churches against the forces of Islam and gnosticism in the past, and against communism and secularism today. The dangers that the *state* should usurp the place of the nation in this understanding of the Church's concern with the daily life of the people as a society, and that national loyalties should become exclusive and aggressive, have all too often been realized, but this should not prevent us from recognizing the positive values which exist.

The ecclesiastical pattern which links together, and at the same time distinguishes one Orthodox Church from another, makes it natural for the Orthodox to approach non-Orthodox Christians on a group basis. Individual converts are received into the Orthodox Church, but I think it would be fair to say that from the Orthodox point of view the *normal* way of establishing communion between themselves and other Christians would be collective, as for instance the union established at the Council of Florence. Unfortunately the effects of this union were for the most part short-lived, but the principle remains valid.

It has often puzzled people how it is possible for the Orthodox Church, with its claims to be the one true Church, to take part in such organizations as the World Council of Churches, composed mainly of Protestants who vigorously deny such a claim. The short answer to this is the obligation felt to witness to the truth of Christ as one believes oneself to receive it. But I think that probably the deeper answer has a different basis, and stems from this strong sociological sense given to catholicity as it is historically expressed among Orthodox communities, and it is the predominating recognition of Christ as the *Pantokrator* which enables the Orthodox Churches to send representatives to the World Council of Churches without any feeling that the Orthodox Church's claim to be the Church might thereby be jeopardized.

Undoubtedly the Orthodox Churches have suffered through the schism with Rome and the development of the spiritual life has been hampered. Moreover they have lost not only the reality but the symbol of unity as expressed through the pope as Christ's Vicar. And though the reality is more important, the loss of the

symbol obscures the vision which prompts men to seek the reality. My point here is that Rome too has suffered through the schism, in particular because every schism hinders the fulfilment of the manifestation of catholicity. There are Catholics other than Latins who worship through the idiom of their own cultural and historical heritage—the term ‘rite’ is often interpreted too narrowly—but practically speaking one has to admit that they are regarded by their very much more numerous Latin brethren as ‘minority groups’. For the most part unfortunately we tend to look on minorities as—at best—a challenge to our tolerance, if not as an actual inconvenience to be accommodated, for undoubtedly the social pressure to conformity is always very great.

Among these Catholics are groups following the Byzantine rite in Arabic, Greek and Slavonic, whose liturgy and devotional practices are similar to those of the corresponding Orthodox Churches. There are also Catholics of other eastern rites, represented by the Copts and the long-established Christian communities in South India. All these groups have been much encouraged by the personal concern and affection expressed by Pope John XXIII for the eastern Christians. They need encouragement because they occupy an isolated position as minorities also in their own countries, and because they are well aware that in order for their fellow-countrymen of dissident eastern churches to be brought into communion with the holy see, the warmth of human sympathy and welcome is needed over and above any doctrinal agreements which may be signed.



ONE IN CHRIST

Texts from St John Chrysostom

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SOME have claimed St John Chrysostom as the greatest Christian preacher of all time. Whether this is true or not is hard to say; and in any case it is doubtful if the discussion of such a claim would be of much value. What is certainly true however is that he had all the qualities needed to make a great preacher. He was a man of strong convictions, with the power to