

REFLECTIONS ON REUNION

WHILST there need be no doubt that the periodical efforts to resuscitate the question of 'Reunion' are motivated by an earnest desire to re-establish the unity of the Church of Christ under One Head, there is a danger that the very word 'Reunion' may be understood in an unorthodox sense, based on a misconception of the Church. To extend sympathy to reunion as something different from Christian unity resting on the firm foundation of Peter¹ would be to hold out a vain expectation calculated to keep those not in communion with the See of Peter away from the true faith. From this point of view stress cannot be laid too heavily on the incontrovertible fact that Catholics and Anglicans are divided on fundamental questions of Faith, and these questions are not solved, and cannot be solved, by conceding that the Reformation was perhaps partly due to the indifference of Catholics themselves. Nor must we run the risk of allowing this essential divergence to be glossed over in the attempt to establish friendly relations with those outside the true fold, even though this be through no fault of their own. If the word 'reunion' is taken to imply that the Anglican communion is a branch of the True Vine,² or an entity not essentially different from the Roman Church, or that it has a corporate life maintained by Our Lord and His Holy Spirit, then it is a heretical term devoid of orthodox interpretation. In view of possible misunderstandings, therefore, it seems well to offer the following observations.

It is perhaps not without significance that in the several letters and decrees of the Holy See on the promotion of Christian unity the term 'reunion' itself, as well as the term 'Church' as applied to the Anglican body, is avoided. And it may not be denied that, though there are

¹Letter of the Holy Office, Sept. 16th, 1864.

²Cf. *Friend, I Do Thee No Wrong*, By W. L. Knox. p. 2.

organised groups of Anglicans, there is no Anglican Church in the Catholic sense of the word. Within the religious sphere no grouping of men can have organic being unless it is fashioned directly by God or recognised under the authority of His Vicar on earth. There can be but one Church—the Catholic Church—and ‘so far from its being possible that communions separate from the Roman See can be rightly called or regarded as Catholic, rather their very separation and disagreement is the mark by which to recognize those communities that hold neither the true faith nor the doctrine of Christ.’³ Further, two possible meanings may be attached to the word ‘reunion,’ neither of which could be accepted by Catholics. The first is a federation of separate Christian Churches, which would in reality remain separate; the second is the formation of one real body by coalition or compromise. The principle upon which both ideas rest ‘is of a kind that turns upside down the divine constitution of the Church.’⁴ It was explicitly stated at Lambeth that the second mode of uniting Christians was the object the bishops had in view. If there is any danger that, in the efforts of Catholics to reconcile their fellow-countrymen to the One Catholic and Apostolic Church, the use of either of these words may be misunderstood, it would no doubt be better to follow the wisdom of the Church in the choice of phraseology.

It seems clear that non-Catholics as a whole are not hopeful (even if they are interested in the project) of attaching themselves in any corporate sense to the Catholic Church, probably because they rightly suppose that the Church will not and cannot accept anything less than complete submission on all points of faith and jurisdiction. Thus Dr. Headlam, if he may be accepted as a mouthpiece, writes concerning relations with the Church of Rome: ‘It must be frankly confessed that so far as we can see there is no possibility at present of any different relations than those

³ Letter of the Holy Office, Sept. 16th, 1864.

⁴ *Ibid.*

now prevailing.⁵ There is no reason for Catholics to be any more optimistic if the only possibility of a final agreement is to be found in compromise on points of principle. Three such impossible compromises are demanded by Dr. Headlam:

1. Anglicans must be allowed to use the creeds to which they are accustomed; and even on express points of defined dogma, such as that of the Immaculate Conception, there must be a giving way according to the late Viscount Halifax, for 'if we are not to expect the Roman Church to go back on what it has authoritatively stated, Rome must, on its side, equally realise the difficulty of asking the Orthodox and Anglican Church to affirm explicitly, as part of the original deposit of their traditional faith, what was not an article of faith even in the Roman Communion until 1854.'⁶

2. There must be united recognition of Orders as sufficient irrespective of formularies used. This idea is likewise expressed in the Report of the Lausanne Conference as follows: 'It is essential that the acceptance of any special form of ordination as the regular and orderly method of introduction into the ministry of the Church for the future should not be interpreted to imply the acceptance of any particular theory of the origin, character or function of any office in the Church universal that believe themselves to have retained valid and apostolic Orders under other forms of ordination; or as disowning or discrediting a past or present ministry of the Word and Sacrament which has been used and blessed by the Spirit of God.' As far as England is concerned this policy implies the recognition that Anglican Orders are valid notwithstanding the solemn utterance to the contrary by the Holy See.

3. There must be union in the Sacrament of the Eucharist. All must agree that no definition or formulary is of any universal authority. Each religious communion must

⁵ *The Doctrine of the Church and Reunion*, p. 298.

⁶ *A Call to Reunion*, p. 8.

be prepared to say that they each accept the doctrine and intention of the other as implied in the respective Liturgies as adequate and that neither side wishes to impose on the other either its statements of doctrines or its denials.⁷

If this is not merely the view of an individual, but expressive of the attitude to Reunion of Anglicans at large, then we had best give up our well-meant attempts to meet them on common ground. This observation, indeed, is confirmed by more than one pronouncement in which the mind of the Holy See is revealed. Thus, in a letter from the Holy Office to the English Bishops (September 16th, 1864), provision was made against the faithful being enrolled in or favouring the society in London 'For promoting' (as it is called) 'the Unity of Christendom,' whose promoters were urged on by the view that the Catholic, schismatic Greek, and the Anglican communions constitute portions of the true Church and could be made one by coalition.⁸ Again, by a decree of the Holy Office (July 4th, 1919) it was ordered that the instructions given (in the letter just mentioned) concerning the London Society for the Promoting of Christian Unity are to be applied and observed by the faithful, as well as those instructions forbidding their participation in meetings, public or private, called by non-Catholics, which have for their aim the procuring of the union of all communions which claim for themselves the name of Christian. In the same Decree an injunction is given to the effect that the letter of 1864 should again be published with the present one.⁹ Lastly, showing that the mind of the Church has not changed in this matter, as recently as July 8th, 1927, the Holy Office issued a Decree containing the resolution that it is not lawful for Catholics to be present at or favour Conferences, Assemblies, Discourses or Societies of non-Catholics, which aim at associating together in one religious league all those who in any

⁷ Headlam; *op. cit.*, pp. 297-8.

⁸ *Acta Sanctæ Sedis*, II, 657.

⁹ *Acta Apostolicæ Sedis*, XI, 309.

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way claim the name of Christians, and that the decree of July, 1919, is to be adhered to absolutely.¹⁰

In view of these authoritative statements, it is clearly impossible for Catholics to take any part in meetings or societies which have for their aim the union of Christendom in the sense stigmatized by the Holy Office or proposed by Dr. Headlam or in the quotation from Lord Halifax. There can be no doubt that it is not the intention of the Holy See to forbid all discussions between Catholics and non-Catholics, but in justice to the latter as well as for their own safe-guarding Catholics must make clear their own orthodox interpretation of the unfortunate word 'reunion' and define clearly the possible scope of such discussions. No profit would accrue from any willingness on our part to discuss 'reunion' in this false and impossible sense, and it might well be taken for granted that this is certainly not the intention of those Catholics who desire a rapprochement. It is a simple fact that the Anglican Church deliberately broke away from union with the See of Peter, and therefore from union with the Church of Christ, but it is equally true that Anglicans of to-day cannot be held responsible for the sin of their ancestors from the effect of which they suffer. This will cause us to be as sympathetic as is consistent with Truth and true Charity, hearing them and asking them questions, even while we are mindful of the wise words of Cardinal Patrizi that for union with our separated brethren 'it will not suffice that ill-will and hatred to the Roman Church be laid aside, but, by the precept and appointment of Christ and by an absolute necessity, the faith and communion of the Roman Church must be embraced.'¹¹

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¹⁰ *Ibid.*, XIX, 287.

¹¹ Letter from Cardinal Patrizi, Prefect of the Holy Office, quoted in *Rome and Reunion*, by Dr. E. C. Messenger, pp. 103-4.