

Whatever happened to ecumenism? It is still with us, of course, but it doesn't seem so important any more. Perhaps it is just taken for granted; the days when it was exciting and almost risqué to take part in the services of another church have long gone by. Perhaps it is simple familiarity that has bred if not contempt at least a certain boredom, but it seems likely that there are other factors as well. For one thing, the feeling that it was urgent for Christians to close ranks against a common foe has diminished. Atheism and 'materialism' don't seem anything like so frightening now that the media have opted for Jesus and transcendental meditation; and when it comes to a concrete issue like abortion half the Christians gang up with the humanists anyway (and vice versa). Moreover the limitations of ecumenism have become more evident. All the mutual goodwill and understanding of theologians and bishops didn't produce a concerted protest in August 1971, when hundreds of Catholics were dragged from their beds to imprisonment, ill-treatment and sometimes torture because they had taken part in the struggle for justice for Catholics and some colonel thought they might have been involved in the I.R.A. We have been reminded that class and nationality still count for more in practical politics than any agreement about religion, and while this may have made us more realistic in our expectations from ecumenism it has also left us a little less interested.

Possibly this accounts for the lassitude that seems to pervade the new Agreed Statement on Ministry and Ordination produced by the Anglican-Roman Catholic International Commission. Two years ago, when the same commission produced their statement on the Eucharist, the sparks flew in several directions. Quite apart from the predictable noises from the Catholic backwoods there was also a good deal of serious debate from both Protestant and Catholic sides. It is hard to believe that this new document will have the same effect.

It begins with a claim that it is going to deal with, and express a 'basic agreement' in areas 'that have been a source of controversy between us'. It does not, however, specify what these disagreements are thought to have been or how they are thought to have been resolved. No doubt it was felt prudent not to remind us of old quarrels, but it is not the business of ecumenism to ignore, but rather to try to show the irrelevance of, out-of-date disputes.

The ordained ministry (about which 'our two traditions commonly use priestly terms') has to be seen, says the commission, in the 'broader context' of other, less official ministries in the Church. It is not, however, 'an extension of the common Christian priesthood but belongs to another realm of the gifts of the Spirit'. Theologians will surely find both 'extension' and 'realm' intolerably vague here, but it is clear that the ordained ministry is thought of as standing over against the Church as a whole (the word 'laity' is eschewed throughout). It exists to 'help the Church to be a royal priesthood' or to 'serve the priest-

hood of all the faithful'. The minister's job is seen primarily as that of leadership and teaching. He is representative of Christ, but he is only seen as representative of the Church 'in the fulfilment of its priestly vocation of self-offering to God as a living sacrifice' . . . 'particularly in presiding at the Eucharist'. The minister is never referred to as a spokesman for the Church. There is, in fact, no sense of a mutual or 'dialectical' relationship between the minister and the rest of the Church. 'By the preaching of the word they seek to bring those who are not Christians into the fellowship of Christ. The Christian message needs also to be unfolded to the faithful . . .'. All, of course, quite true, but might we not have heard something as well about the minister as listener, as learner, as one who, sensitive to the work of the Spirit in one part of the Church, is able to make this available to others? Of course 'this statement is not designed to be an exhaustive treatment' but nonetheless the effect is somewhat one-sided.

The sacramental function of the minister is firmly and rightly placed within the context of his general role as centre of leadership and unity: 'It is right that he who has oversight in the Church and is focus of its unity should preside at the celebration of the Eucharist', and there is a general playing down of the concept of the 'massing-priest'. The Mass of ordination, for example, is not seen primarily as the new minister's first priestly act, but rather 'Because ministry is in and for the community and because ordination is an act in which the whole Church of God is involved, this prayer and laying on of hands takes place within the context of the Eucharist'. This, with the corresponding emphasis on the minister as preacher, cannot be faulted. But very much is missing: the notion of 'character' is not made use of in the document and the argument for the irrevocability of ordination is thin to say the least of it. Questions concerning the Roman recognition of Anglican orders, of authority and of primacy are left to another time.

In general it is a disappointing document, eirenical rather than ecumenical, unlikely to raise many hackles but unlikely also to be much help to those wrestling with the issues that still really divide us.

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