

## FIVE QUESTIONS TO THE CATHOLIC CHURCH<sup>1</sup>

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*The second all-German Una Sancta Congress was held at the end of June at the Catholic centre of Burg Rothenfels in Germany. There Dr Asmussen, a well-known Lutheran theologian, put the following questions to the Catholic Church. We are publishing this with a reply to those questions as a contribution to understanding between separated brethren.*

**T**HE questions I want to put to the Catholic Church can be summed up in one: You Catholics, we Evangelicals<sup>2</sup>—who do you think we are? What do you make of us?

(1) To begin with our baptism. It is no secret that in the case of converts, baptism is usually repeated, arousing deep dismay on the Evangelical side. In my opinion there is no justification for this. There seems to be no doubt that, in Catholic doctrine, baptism performed according to the Evangelical ritual is valid. But in practice the circumstances of a previous baptism are seldom taken into account.

In Germany, it is true, owing to the revolution now proceeding in liturgical matters, it is often difficult to lay hands on the baptismal ritual. For instance, one is now to be had in the Schleswig-Holstein Church, but five years ago it was not so. And in Westfalen I recently heard that a high-placed Catholic priest had tried in vain to obtain a copy of the Westfalen ritual: likely enough, for the new ones are still not printed and the old are unobtainable.

Thus, my first question is: Does the Catholic Church really hold that an Evangelical baptism performed according to the ritual does not need to be renewed? If so, may we beg our Catholic friends to stir up public opinion within their communion in the hope of discouraging any of the clergy who may be disposed to do a thing they are not required to do.

<sup>1</sup> From the review *Una Sancta*—'to hope against all hope as we are taught by our faith'—September 1956. Translated from the German by Ruth Mary Bethell.

<sup>2</sup> The word *Evangelisch* in the German Lutheran Church corresponds to 'Anglican' in England rather than 'Protestant' or 'Evangelical', and includes manifestations which some Anglicans would term Catholic. For Lutherans, 'Catholic' applies to the Church of Rome only. (*Translator's note.*)

(2) What is your view of us as Christians? In the Acts of the Apostles we read of a woman who said to the apostles, 'Now you have decided that I have faith in the Lord, come to my house.' I imagine that a Catholic would find no difficulty in stating that for a member of the Evangelical communion there exists at least the possibility of 'having faith'—a possibility that is often a certainty. But the difficulty is, do we agree that *being Christian* is a distinctive character? So that when people are acknowledged as Christians—that is, as belonging to our Lord Jesus Christ—it means they have passed through the gateway from death into life, implying that a communion exists which is stronger than death, whether we are aware of it or not. Do we—Catholics and Evangelicals—indeed form such a communion, on the basis of our common Christianity? If so—if you, our Catholic brothers, believe this—then what is it, intrinsically?

(3) I must anticipate my third question, for what is at stake is our claim to be a *Church*. I have a good deal of sympathy for the view of the Catholic Church and of individual Catholics, that the Evangelical Church is no Church. We must swallow that with the rest, or it might occur to someone to dig up the verdict of the old Reformers, that the Catholic Church is no Church.

But when the question of Church or no Church presents such a problem—and indeed it is a problem, and one not easily disposed of—what is to be made of our form of Christianity? You admit its existence, but has this any factual significance if it does not imply acceptance of our form of Church too? From the time I first began to concern myself with Catholic matters to this very day, I have received and still receive diverging answers to this question. Not so long ago, a highly-placed cleric of the Catholic Church in Germany spoke as though he took it for granted that the decisive question was whether people were members of the Church or not; whether they were Christians or not did not seem to matter so much.

To prove that I am not over-stating my case, I refer to a document from the South American Bishops' Conference. One of the matters under consideration was the impending danger of Protestantism overrunning South America, and how it was to be warded off. The distribution of Protestant Bibles was deplored, and at the same time consideration was given to the problem of parishes with thirty thousand and

more parishioners with not even a priest a-piece.

Can one really speak of a threat to the Catholic Church in places where it is wholly absent? Please forgive this rather pointed intrusion.

Does *Catholic* count for more than *Christian*? I put the question in that form because I know there is the same trend in my own Church, where many may well be Evangelical first, Christian second; assuming we are and remain Evangelical, we can then see whether we are Christian or not.

I want to draw your attention to this danger, for I believe it is acute. Hence my double question: What do you make of us as Christians, and what do you make of us as Churchmen?

I would like to add: Are Christendom and the Church the same thing? In the New Testament there are so many passages in support of the idea that a Church is the sum of the faithful at any given place, that for many years of my life I believed the Church consisted in the gathering together of the faithful; and it was some time before I observed that this was only one line of thought, whereas another sequence of ideas in the New Testament shows us that the Church is there *before* the faithful are.

You, our Catholic brothers, well know how often it is said that you claim to be the one true Church. It is an unsatisfactory statement. You could believe it only if you were convinced there was no question of Christians outside the Roman Church. And there exists, I know, a strong movement against this view in Catholic circles. But that is not the main point, and I feel the time is ripe for clear formulation: the Catholic communion, as well as our own, should be busy discussing the question of how far Church and Christendom are not identical. I venture to suggest that there is a Christendom outside the Catholic Church.

(4) What is your view of our *Sacrament*? I mean in particular the Sacrament of the altar. You may well say, an Evangelical clergyman is not authorized, and we Evangelicals cannot deny it. Indeed, none of us would refrain from earnestly talking it over with a Catholic when occasion offered. I cannot imagine any of the Evangelical clergy not being profoundly disturbed by the Catholic challenge on this point; I, at least, am. But that is not to say it is without issue. May I put my question in another form:

What do you Catholics desire, and what does the Catholic Church desire, in regard to our sacramental services? Do you want as few people as possible to take part, or as many as possible? For if it is not a sacrament at all—what are all the poor souls doing there? Here, you see, the more emotional replies will run counter to the more logical ones. To quote a great living Catholic theologian, 'the Lutheran Sacrament of the altar is not nothing'. In view of the four centuries behind us and all they stood for, I consider this quiet answer to my question, solemnly given, an encouraging one. What we need from you is an elucidation of your views, with a statement that will really mean something to us. What is the good of merely repeating the formulae of bygone days, formulae that by-pass us and fail to touch us at all? It seems to me that the Catholic Church is undergoing a revival, seeing the steadily increasing numbers for whom this question is an actual one.

(5) My fifth and last question is, what do you make of our clerical Orders? We are not a part of your hierarchy, and no Evangelical theologian would be so foolish as to resent your saying that not being within the hierarchy means we lack something, perhaps everything. We are now at the heart of the question: is it something, or everything, that we lack? What do you think? We must know! For it is of fundamental importance for our *Una Sancta* work, our work in common. Let me explain. When an Evangelical bishop is deposed by an atheist State, does it concern the Catholic Church as such? Of course the reverse question is equally actual: when Cardinal Mindszenty is deposed it concerns us all, all Evangelicals together. And woe to us if it is not so. Indeed, that 'woe to us' has come true all too often. That is why I say: If these fundamental things are true, then there must be something that counts, in our Orders, even if theological distinctions do not account for it—something that has not hitherto been given theological definition. And I beg that it be done! For the following reasons: we are pleased—not in a self-satisfied way, but with genuine disinterested pleasure—at finding so many Protestant hymns in Catholic hymnals. May I enquire how those hymns got into your hymnals? Take our Paul Gerhardt: how is it that you like him so much? Don't you know that his hymns are Church hymns, owing their weightiness to the Church in which they arose and for which they were written? You will reply, as

we may well believe, Yes, but you are not a proper Church. Well, then, what *are* we? If the Spirit of God and the power of God was manifest, thus, and there, what does it imply?

In other words, in the New Testament the idea is basic that the Holy Spirit himself is at work wherever the name of Jesus is proclaimed with authority. And not for our own sakes, but for the sake of that Church unity which is one day to become visible, we must require that *theological categories that are still lacking today be created to express this*. We are in the fortunate position of seeing how these things are done in the Catholic Church: what popular opinion wants today will become a new dogma tomorrow—or so they say. Levity apart, there is more truth in this than one might suppose. I would merely add, there is no point in our meeting and talking like this unless we produce sincere and honest plans for the future, plans that do not make too great demands on the other side. And, Catholic brothers, I do not think these five questions of mine make too great demands on you.



## FIVE ANSWERS FROM THE CATHOLIC SIDE

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OUR non-Catholic friends often ask us questions, in particular about our Catholic attitude to themselves, for most of those who are anxious about Christian unity inevitably feel that their own position in relation to the Catholic Church is a key-issue in the whole matter. In the September number of *Una Sancta* a prominent Lutheran theologian asks of his Catholic friends five questions, which to him represent the major problems of a Protestant considering the relation of Catholic and Protestant. The writer is Dr Hans Asmussen of Heidelberg, and his five questions are enquiries about the Catholic attitude towards Protestants on certain issues. The same questions *mutatis mutandis* might be asked by an Anglican or Free Churchman in this country, though every group would present the questions in a different context and perhaps add particular ones of their own.

A number of *THE LIFE OF THE SPIRIT* devoted to Christian Unity seems a most suitable place for a Catholic's answer to the questions.