

Comment

It is, of course, fairly common for the same facts to be interpreted in quite different ways by people whose general policies are very different. It is rather rare, though, to find opposing parties by coincidence inventing exactly the same distortion of the facts to use for their opposite ends. There was a splendid example of this, however, in the response of the *Times* (actually a UPI agency report) and the *Catholic Herald* respectively to the statement on ecumenical collaboration from the Vatican Secretariat for Christian Unity. The former report, clearly intended to stress the illiberal character of the Roman Church, had as its headline *Vatican Gives Warning on 'Wildcat Ecumenism'*. The *Catholic Herald*, concerned on the other hand to warn us against the dangerous innovators in our midst, also said *Vatican Warns Against 'Wildcat Ecumenism'*. In the face of such a cloud of witnesses, who would have guessed that in its twenty-nine pages the statement, signed by the President of the Secretariat, the excellent Cardinal Willebrands, does not make any reference at all to 'wildcat ecumenism'? The phrase seems to have been coined by some hysterical clergyman at a press-conference in Rome.

The first twenty-eight pages of the statement are an account of various forms of collaboration that Christian Churches have experimented with throughout the world. There is particular emphasis on the importance of local initiative and local variety; for a Roman document it is remarkable in its refreshing vision of a decentralised pluralist Church. In the course of these pages there is just one reference to the difficulties that may be created 'if ecumenical initiatives are left *solely* to unofficial groups', and the statement immediately goes on to say that 'Such difficulties will best be avoided if there is an obvious and sincere commitment to ecumenism by the local church'. This is quite clearly not a warning against 'wildcat ecumenists'; it is a rebuke to bishops who drag their feet.

At last on the final page there is a brief consideration of spontaneous ecumenical groups. Concerning these 'wildcats' the Vatican document says that they are 'motivated by renewed appreciation of the word of Christ', and that they are 'rediscovering central Christian truths out of their confrontation with a surrounding world which appears dechristianised and depersonalised. Through their varied experiences they may have new insights of importance for the future growth and direction of the ecumenical movement'. After these harsh and bitter words, Cardinal Willebrands goes on: 'It is desirable that there be real communication between the more organised or more formal expressions of the ecumenical movement and these groups when they seek

to discover new ways of meeting contemporary needs and therefore engage in experimental projects. In connection with the hierarchy of the Church, these informal groups can offer original and inspiring ideas. . . .’ What this plainly says is that the official ecumenical commissions organised by the local hierarchies should seek out and communicate with unofficial groups because they have a lot to learn from them. The document goes on to state the obvious: that without such contact with the hierarchy, such groups ‘run the risk of becoming unfaithful to Catholic principles of ecumenism and even of endangering the faith’. The Cardinal then issues a *double warning*: ‘If this communication is ignored there is not only a danger that ecumenism may become detached from the pressing concerns of people in society but these groups themselves may become unbalanced and sectarian’. The first warning is to the bishops: if they don’t keep in touch with what is going on unofficially their ecumenism will be a clerical affair losing touch with the whole people of God. The second warning is to the unofficial groups themselves: if they too neglect this two-way communication they are in danger of becoming little self-righteous, elitist cliques, “sectarian” in fact’ (hands up all those with practical ecumenical experience who disagree with this). Both sides are warned of the danger of isolating themselves but, for their various purposes, the British press, secular and Catholic, has chosen to ignore one half of the warning.

This is particularly unfortunate in a region where the official hierarchies need all the exhortation and warning they can get from Rome or anywhere else in the matter of ecumenism. Despite all the smooth, polite (and very welcome) progress that has been made amongst ecumenical experts and theologians there is every sign that it is more than somewhat ‘detached from the pressing concerns of people’. To take an obvious example, in an area where ecumenism is liable to be met not with apathy or discouragement but with a bullet in the back, in Belfast where crossing the religious divide demands real physical courage, we have recently seen one of our most dedicated workers for peace and unity amongst Christians, Fr Desmond Wilson, disowned and reviled by the man one can only describe as his local Extraordinary. (Besides publishing ridiculous second-hand gossip about one of his priests, this Bishop has, in the past, actively disrupted his work and sought to prevent well-wishers from contributing to the community projects that form one of the few signs of hope in that tortured city.) Meanwhile our own preposterous man at Westminster has (to put it with a charity verging on the inane) done nothing to discourage the departure from the priesthood in helpless frustration of two outstandingly ecumenical scholars, Hubert Richards and Nicholas Lash. We have a good and efficient official Ecumenical Commission but there must be few regions where Cardinal Willebrands’s appeal for communication should be listened to more intently and responded to more generously.

H.McC.