

## UNITY WORK IN FRANCE<sup>1</sup>

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IT is essential to have a clear idea of the numerical strength of the various religious denominations in France, if we are to assess correctly the present effort towards Christian unity in that country. The great majority of the population is Catholic, at least in name; Protestants, Calvinist and Lutheran (leaving sects like Jehovah's Witnesses and Seventh Day Adventists out of account) number about 750,000; the Greek and Russian Orthodox come to a few thousand.

Thus the religious bodies adhering to the World Council of Churches represent a tiny minority in France. This explains why their problems, whatever their intrinsic interest, remain in the background. The movement for Christian unity in France hinges primarily on the relationship between Protestants and Catholics.

However, a number of factors conspire to make this movement a matter of real, not just academic, concern; there is a general interest throughout the country in ecumenical matters; there are the shifts of population which were increased by the last war; there is especially what may be called the Protestant 'diaspora', the fact, that is, that for the last fifty years or so the traditionally Huguenot areas have been emptying themselves by a Protestant dispersion over the country as a whole. Thus we and our separated brethren have been brought closer together, and as in other countries, there has been a marked increase in mixed marriages.

It must be added that the 'ecumenical honeymoon', for which the shared sufferings of the war and the occupation were responsible, began to fade out in disillusionment about 1950. There was some feeling of disappointment among Protestants, as life returned once more to its humdrum routine, and as certain events took place in the Catholic world which made a painful impression on our separated brethren. In the dogmatic sphere, for instance, there was the definition of the Assumption of the Virgin Mary which crowned and represented a whole trend of marial devo-

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tion; in pastoral matters there was the stand taken by Rome over a number of missionary and apostolic movements in France. All this forcefully reminded the Protestants that the basic principles and structure of Catholicism, which some of them would have liked to forget, are still as unyielding as ever.

Catholics on their side experienced disappointment, in so far as they had misjudged the importance, in the complex world of Protestantism, of a few rather extreme tendencies which they had somewhat naively assumed to be typical. Here too illusions were shattered.

This mutual disillusionment has proved to be a blessing in so far as it has done away with mistaken ideas on either side. It forces us all to face facts objectively, as does also the problem created by more frequent contacts and by mixed marriages. So much so, that the last few years have witnessed in all denominations what may in some cases be a more intransigent attitude towards each other, but is most often on the part of those with pastoral responsibilities a most proper anxiety to guide and instruct the faithful committed to their care.

This is very noticeable within the ranks of the Reformed Church in France. Lack of space, unfortunately, prevents us from giving more details here. But among the Catholics too, we believe, labours for unity are marked by this same primary concern for making available solid guidance on everything to do with the delicate problems of Christian unity. We should like to mention a few outstanding efforts which are being directed to this end.

For the clergy there is an important series of conferences at Chatelard, near Lyons. Begun in 1945, these take place every year at the beginning of July. After some hesitations and a certain fluidity in the first few years, the conference has now assumed a definite shape, which comprises three elements. First a doctrinal subject is introduced by a competent theologian with a view to discussion with our separated brethren; next, plenty of time is given to reflection on practical pastoral matters (how to 'put across' Christian unity in the parish; how to organize services, or vigils, of prayer; what to do about mixed marriages, etc.); finally the provision of indispensable information on matters ecumenical throughout the world is not forgotten. This makes a pretty full programme of hard work, which takes place in the prayerful atmosphere of a retreat house set in a large park. About

fifty priests take part in this four-days conference every year. They come from all over France and from abroad, particularly from Switzerland. Some of them are parish priests or curates from those mixed regions where the problem of Protestantism is perpetually present. Then there are professors from seminaries and chaplains from Catholic Action groups, etc. Actually, one of the most valuable results of these gatherings is the individual contacts that are made, and the evening discussions when all are invited to contribute their own experience.

Other conferences take place from time to time in other places. But what prevents them from being far more numerous in France is the very small number of theologians well briefed in this field.

For the last two years the conference at Chatelard has been matched by a gathering intended for laymen, in which the spiritual aspects of the mystery of Christian unity are set forth, and a certain amount of information is provided.

A similar and older venture should be mentioned here. Every year in the summer holidays a Catholic school-mistress invites small groups of lay-people, usually about ten at a time, to attend a series of study conferences given by well-informed priests. According to the particular bent of the priest in question, these meetings deal predominantly with a doctrinal, spiritual, or informative aspect of the work for reunion; though, of course, each of these topics is touched on at all the conferences. These meetings are meant particularly for those lay-people who are going to take on, in their parishes or at their work, special responsibilities during the week of prayer for unity, January 18th to 25th.

Here we must mention the study conferences organized by the *Centre Istina* in Paris, and the *Centre Saint-Irénée* in Lyons. These take place during the scholastic year, and supplement the summer courses already mentioned. Thanks to these and many other efforts, especially those connected with youth or student organizations, the number of Catholics who receive a sound grounding in the ecumenical movement is growing apace.

The January week of prayer for unity naturally takes many forms, which we have no space to describe. Suffice it to say that it is more and more widely observed. The number of tracts and pamphlets which are published by the centre at Lyons is also noticeably increasing.

It might be of interest to dwell a little on the latest attempts

of Catholics and Protestants to work together. These activities often begin or culminate during the week of prayer for Unity, and are usually continued for several of the following months. The axiom they work on is the fact that Christians, in the name of the Gospel, present a more solid front to the world, and are much closer to each other than one would at first imagine. They present a more solid front, because non-Christians scarcely distinguish between Catholics, Protestants and Orthodox, but judge all Christians *en bloc*. So that all that is positively good in the life of Catholics or Protestants is not just to the advantage of one or the other, but of one *and* the other. On the other hand the failings of Catholics *or* Protestants reflect badly on Catholics *and* Protestants. They are also much closer to each other, as the apostolic and missionary work of the last fifteen years in France has shown. And although there has been no lessening of the dogmatic differences which so tragically divide Catholics from the heirs of the Reformation, nevertheless in many spheres they bear the same witness to Christianity. For proof of this we need look no further than the Rallies which our Protestant friends have started holding nowadays (Strasbourg in 1956, Royan in 1957, one to be held in the North some time in the future); on many matters to do with the family, social, and civic responsibilities of Christians, the Protestant witness is very akin to our own.

A quickened conscience on such things has stimulated in many people a keen desire to bear such witness together and to join forces in these matters with their separated brethren. Catholics who take this line with prudence are only following the plain wishes of the Sovereign Pontiff. On several occasions during these last few years Pius XII has asked the faithful to unite their efforts with those of separated Christians to foster the common good and God's cause on levels where doctrinal differences are not directly involved, and where collaboration is possible without the least disloyalty to Catholic tradition.

This effort of shared reflection and concrete Christian witness when faced with the crying needs of the world is to be met with both at the level of the parish or district, where *militants* can cooperate locally in such matters as providing help for the homeless, clearing slums, setting up employment agencies, helping with maladjusted children, giving assistance to the aged, etc.; and at the regional or national level by establishing contacts between

and co-ordinating the efforts of such parallel organizations as *Economie et Humanisme* and *Chronique Sociale de France* on the Catholic side and *Christianisme Social* on the Protestant.

This common quickening of conscience, this working together as far as possible to alleviate suffering has the great advantage of inducing lay people to work for Christian unity in their own professional civic or social spheres. Here we find a potential field of action which until lately has been somewhat neglected by Catholics, while it has been assiduously cultivated—too much, some would say—by members of the World Council. The movement towards reunion is not, after all, merely a matter of dogmatic theology and theologians. Lay people in their own sphere, and without infringing on territory not their own, have a very important part to play. The most live parishes and Catholic Action groups are busy harnessing their energies to this work. There are a number of interdenominational groups working in the same direction, such as *L'Amitié* (Christian teachers), *La Cimade* and *Le Mouvement Chrétien pour la Paix*.

What has just been said does not minimize the prime importance of the search for truth through the meeting of theologians. Here too great work is being done. Several groups of Protestant ministers and Catholic priests (sometimes with a few representatives of the Orthodox Church) meet regularly, in conformity with the conditions stated by Canon Law, as revised by the Instruction of the Holy Office of December 20th, 1949. The oldest and best-known group meets each year alternately at the Trappist monastery at Dombes and at a Protestant Retreat House in France or Switzerland. As they are extremely anxious to avoid the indiscreet publicity of the popular press, always hungry for sensational news, these study groups, which are gradually becoming more numerous, meet as unobtrusively as possible. We are sure that no one will grudge our respecting that discretion here.

In preparation for the week of prayer for unity in 1957 an important ecumenical exhibition was organized at Lyons, from where it has since visited other towns as well. This exhibition, we feel, both in its achievement and its preparation, is a good example of what can be done at the present day, and so we shall give a fairly detailed description of it.

The initiative was taken by some Protestant ministers and laymen of Lyons who wanted to make known the work of the

World Council. From the first they were anxious to interest the Orthodox communities in their project, which was natural enough, since most of the Orthodox Church are members of the Council at Geneva. These responded to the appeal as far as their small numbers in and around Lyons permitted.

The question was much more delicate when it came to the Catholics. Our Church—for reasons that are well known—is not a member of the World Council of Churches, so it was impossible to ask Catholics to take part fully and officially. But it was also impossible to forget, in Lyons, M. L'Abbé Couturier and his magnificent work for Christian unity; impossible too for such an ambitious undertaking—for a fine and spacious exhibition was planned, and this meant expense—to succeed, if it failed to attract the Catholics.

We have good reason to congratulate ourselves on both sides of the denominational fence over the way things were managed. And Catholics have reason to be grateful for the attitude of the Protestant promoters of the exhibition. All through the months of preparation they held frequent discussions with the responsible officials of the diocese and with theologians who have specialized in ecumenical work. This co-operation bore fruit. The Catholics were entrusted, in particular, with the task of producing the last stall of the exhibition, which illustrated the call to prayer for unity in the spirit of the Abbé Couturier. At the opening, which took place in the presence of the civil authorities, there were two speeches, one by M. Jullian (Protestant), curator of the Lyons Museum, and the other by Dr Visser t'Hooft, the general secretary of the World Council of Churches. Mgr Dupuy represented Cardinal Gerlier, and it is hardly necessary to emphasize the significance of his presence at this ceremony.

A circular letter has been sent out in advance to parish priests and chaplains in Lyons, drawing their attention to the importance of the exhibition, and pointing out its real interest to us, while at the same time noting its chief omission, namely that the position of the Catholic Church, since it is not a member of the World Council, was not fully exhibited. Catholic visitors came in large numbers to swell the Protestant crowds. There were guides at everybody's service, but often groups of Catholics were brought by their parish priests who explained the various stalls illustrating the sub-divisions and extensions of the work of the Council, and

who filled in the gaps with their commentaries.

Effective good was accomplished by the ecumenical exhibition at Lyons. Through it many Christians, Catholic and Protestant alike, either discovered for the first time or understood more clearly than before, the tragedy of disunited Christendom and the urgent need of prayer and work for unity.

Another Protestant venture is the Ecumenical Commission of the Protestant Federation of France. Its President, Professor Mehl, after having reminded his hearers of the important part played from the beginning by French Protestants in the ecumenical movement, went on to say: 'It is vital that our Churches in France should make a *collective* contribution to the work of the World Council of Churches. Many of them have thought that they might join forces instead of working in isolation. Therefore in response to a suggestion of the Council of the Protestant Federation of France, the Reformed Church of France, the Reformed Church of Alsace and Lorraine, the Lutheran Evangelical Church of France, and the Church of Augsburg Confession have all decided to set up a commission of ecumenical studies which can keep in touch with the studies division of the World Council.' The commission is directing energies in a very delicate matter; it aims at overcoming the obstacles to a possible reunion of the Lutherans and the Calvinist Reformed into one single Evangelical Church of France.

The commission is composed of five sub-commissions, each made up of a dozen members, ministers and lay people. The subjects for the first four to study are as follows; the relationship between Christ and the Church, the theology of preaching the gospel, the attitude of Christians to war, the responsibility of Christians and Churches as regards countries undergoing rapid social changes. As for the subject proposed for the fifth sub-commission's consideration, it concerns us quite specially; it is the examination of the development at the present day of French Catholicism. The examination is to be carried out both by studying the principal Catholic publications on all subjects, and by making contacts as far as possible with representative Catholics.

In connection with this undertaking we must mention first a research centre on Catholicism attached to the faculty of Protestant theology at Montpellier, and secondly a meeting of Protestant ministers of Eastern France which took place at Strasbourg in the

spring of 1957, and which was partly devoted to a discussion on Ecumenism and Catholicism.

It should not be necessary to stress that this endeavour on the part of Protestants to be well informed about the Catholic faith calls for a parallel effort on the part of Catholics to make a serious study of Protestantism *in its living reality*. This indeed is the aim of more than one study group of theologians, in particular of the *Centre Saint-Irénée*. The over-all picture of these various researches seems to us extremely important; the unity movement will only make progress through a true mutual knowledge of separated brethren, avoiding as wholly as possible all illusions and prejudices.

The Christian unity movement is unquestionably under way in France, both as regards the quality and the extensiveness of the work being done. It is still being held in check, however, by the indifference of too many Christians who are incapable of truly Catholic, that is to say universal, feeling, or of having at heart the great problems of the Church. There is also the limiting fact that there are far too few theologians and leaders who are competent in this field. And there are two more obstacles which we would like to sketch very briefly.

The first militates directly against the week of prayer for unity, 18th to 25th of January. Many Christians, Catholic and Protestant alike, still fail to appreciate the real level at which the universal prayer for unity takes place; it is the level of Christ's prayer, in which everyone remains absolutely loyal to his own creed, but goes at the same time straight to the source and asks for complete obedience to the will of God, that is for holiness, for himself and his separated brethren. Not to place oneself in the very prayer of Christ is to restrict both the depth and the extension which the prayer that all may be one could have. Then in Protestant circles there is a certain amount of clashing between the week of universal prayer and the Evangelical Alliance's week of prayer at the beginning of every year on behalf of 'Christians of every nation and every race who witness to the Word of God'.

The second obstacle is even more formidable. The Catholic Church's refusal to take part in the work of the Ecumenical Council is a 'scandal' for many Protestants, a rock of stumbling at 'ecumenical' meetings with its members. This difficulty is acute in a country where, as we have explained, the ecumenical problem is that of the relationship between Catholicism and the



denominations which spring from the Reformation.

In conclusion, two notes by way of rounding off our subject. If we have barely mentioned the Orthodox, it is only because there are so few of them in France. But we would hate to give the impression that they are in any way lacking in zeal for Christian unity. The *Institut Saint-Serge* in Paris arranges a number of most instructive gatherings. Furthermore, Orthodox priests and lay people play a helpful part in representing the Eastern Christian tradition in several interdenominational groups and organizations.

We have limited our survey strictly to France. But the work for unity which goes on here is quite inseparable from that done in other parts of the world, especially in other French-speaking countries. The monastery of Chèvetogne in Belgium, its review *Irenikon* and the gatherings it sponsors could almost be looked upon as part of the French ecumenical scene. Those French theologians who have reunion at heart owe a very great deal to the work and experience of other countries, and *vice versa* the work done here has its repercussions outside France. Only consider, for example, the wide circulation of the Lyons pamphlets on the week of prayer for unity, or of publications like the bulletin *Vers l'Unité Chrétienne* and the review *Istina*.

As we continue to work and pray that all Christ's followers may be one, we are indissolubly bound up together.