

AUTHORITY AND THE ECUMENICAL DILEMMA

HENRY ST JOHN, O.P.

THE most recent pronouncement of the Holy See on the Ecumenical Movement is the Instruction of the Holy Office to Local Ordinaries of December 20, 1949.¹ By its provisions Catholic ecumenical work, described in it as 'reunion' work, is safeguarded by cautionary measures and put under the direct supervision of the bishops, who are urged to give it prudent encouragement and direction, as a work which 'should daily assume a more significant place within the Church's pastoral care'. They are to appoint suitable priests, in each diocese, to make a special study of the movement and everything connected with it.

If any priest is contemplating the task laid upon him as a result of this directive, he cannot do better than make *A History of the Ecumenical Movement* the basis and starting point of his studies;² a massively conceived and well planned volume of some eight hundred pages, written by fifteen experts in their respective subjects. Hardly an idea, event or person of ecumenical importance lacks at least a reference in these pages, and the full bibliography will give sufficient aid in following out a more complete study.

The volume falls into two distinct parts. The first comprises a history, from the Reformation onwards, of efforts by ecumenically minded persons to bring about the healing of schisms within Christendom. The second deals with the Ecumenical Movement proper; an organized movement expressing itself in World Conferences and culminating in the formation of the World Council of Churches at Amsterdam in 1948. This latter part brings to the reader a sharpened sense of the amazing difference of atmosphere and accomplishment that Christian ecumenism has effected. Three hundred and fifty years of sporadic individual effort, by both Catholics and Protestants, to heal some at least of Christendom's wounds; almost all abortive, or at least without actual achieve-

¹ The text of this document, in English, will be found in *The Tablet*, March 4, 1950, page 175.

² *A History of the Ecumenical Movement 1517-1948*. Edited by Ruth Rouse and Stephen Charles Neill. (S.P.C.K.; 32s. 6d.). To it I would also add *Documents on Christian Unity*, two volumes, 1920-30 and 1930-48, by G. K. A. Bell. (Oxford University Press, 1948 and 1955.)

ment. Then, during the past fifty years, the extraordinary phenomenon of a spontaneous outburst of intense desire for Christian unity, taking shape in a corporate movement, which embraces almost the whole of World Protestantism,³ and, with a lesser degree of official involvement, the various ancient autocephalous Churches of the East.

The twentieth century has seen in fact an immense achievement of corporate and organic reunion within World Protestantism. Bishop Stephen Neill, in an appendix to his chapter on 'Plans of Union and Reunion', gives an interesting schematic table, which records the actual accomplishment of unity between 1910, the inaugural year of the Movement proper, and 1952. This table shows no less than thirty-four different mergers of hitherto separated Churches, resulting in full organic union. The numbers of corporate bodies in each vary from two to eleven, and they are located in every part of the world and on every continent. The table records also seventeen instances in which negotiations are still in progress with a view to organic union, and others too in which federal unity or full intercommunion has been achieved.

Catholics will naturally ask themselves whether this kind of reunion can be regarded as a genuine unity in faith, capable of subserving the ultimate unity of Christendom willed by Christ, the unity already existent in the Catholic Church. The Holy See itself seems to hint at an answer to these questions when it says, in the *Instruction*, that the growing desire outside the Church for the reunion of all those who believe in Christ may be attributed, under the inspiration of the Holy Ghost, to external factors and the changing attitude of men's minds, and above all to united prayer. Moreover all the unities up to now achieved have some genuine basis of unity in truth believed,⁴ because the subject-matter of agreement is doctrine clearly contained in Scripture and therefore held to be 'fundamental'; what is considered not to be so contained being regarded as 'non-fundamental', and therefore not obligatory. The ultimate ecumenical dilemma however lies not between separated Protestants who share this common basis, but

3 Included in this description, for the sake of convenience, are the various Churches of the Anglican Communion, though the Anglican system in itself resists too close an identification with World Protestantism, and many Anglicans would vigorously repudiate any such identification.

4 The case of the Church of South India, to be mentioned later, seems however to be a partial exception.

between World Protestantism, for which the supremacy of Scripture over the Church is basic, and the Catholic and Orthodox Churches, for both of which the Church, undivided and indivisible, is alone the authoritative interpreter of the written Word of Scripture by God's Word spoken. For both the latter, the voice of the Church, by dogmatic definition, determines in the last resort the meaning of Scripture, and all that is thus determined is held to be fundamental because spoken by God himself. Traditional non-Protestant Christendom, in both East and West, stands then for the principle laid down in the Encyclical *Mortalium Animos*, that it is never lawful to employ in connection with 're-union' the distinction between 'fundamental' and 'non-fundamental' articles of faith, the former to be accepted by all, the latter being left free to the acceptance of the faithful.⁵

In spite of the elements of Catholic doctrine with which they are permeated, the Church of England and the Old Catholics stand, in this matter, with World Protestantism and not with traditional non-Protestant Christendom. Their presuppositions compel them to hold the Church to be divisible and actually divided, and therefore without a decisive living voice. They assert the supremacy of Scripture as interpreted by the primitive and undivided Church, and in doing so appeal away from the present Church, speaking here and now, to a past witness, existing as such only in history, and so dependent upon the findings of critical research. For the same reason, to maintain their own position and acknowledge that of others, they must distinguish between 'fundamental' and 'non-fundamental' articles of faith in the sense in which Bishop Gore pleaded for this at the Malines Conversations.⁶

5 *A.A.S.*, XX, page 5. English translation in *Documents on Christian Unity 1920-30*, page 197.

6 *Recollections of Malines*, by Walter Frere (London, 1935), page 7; and Addendum VII, page 110. The words of *Mortalium Animos* referred to in the previous paragraph were aimed, no doubt, at Bishop Gore's plea which may be summarized here in his own words. 'I suppose that the principle of toleration on matters which are not *de fide* will be admitted on both sides of our conference table. The differences between us would only begin to appear with the question, What is *de fide*, or—What is the final voice of authority? What I want to do now is not to raise this question directly, but to put in a plea for the widest possible toleration of differences between Churches, both in doctrine and practice, on the basis of agreement in the necessary articles of Catholic communion.' For Bishop Gore the necessary articles of Catholic communion were the doctrines which are 'fundamental' according to his own premises, and he is here asking for all other doctrines to be regarded as 'non-fundamental', and not obligatory as terms of communion. This plea was raised upon a misunderstanding of the use of the terms *fundamental* and *non-fundamental* by certain Catholic theologians. According to this

The Church of England has always stood, in practice, for episcopacy as an institution, though with a wide variety of opinion as to its nature and necessity. In spite of the Preface to the Ordinal, in the book of Common Prayer, it is not evident from Holy Scripture and ancient authors that the three historic orders were in the Church from the Apostles' time, and it certainly cannot be maintained that episcopacy is plainly read in the Scriptures and can be proved by them. In negotiating reunion, therefore, with non-episcopal bodies the Church of England is unable to treat episcopacy as a fundamental article of faith, and its adoption by non-episcopal bodies is, of necessity, proposed for acceptance as an institution only, no particular belief about it being obligatory. This was so, for example, in the setting up of the Church of South India. Catholics will be in considerable doubt, as indeed many Anglicans themselves are, whether this evacuation of the true conception of episcopacy will not hinder rather than promote the ultimate solution of the ecumenical dilemma.

Mortalium Animos makes clear, as we have seen, the principle upon which the non-participation of the Holy See in things ecumenical is based. The Eastern Orthodox, less committed, as autocephalous Churches, to the need for unitary action, do engage, though with reservations, in ecumenical co-operation. In doing so however they make very clear their firm adhesion to this same principle. At the World Conference on Faith and Order at Lausanne in 1927 they abstained from voting on all but one of the Reports proposed for acceptance by the Conference. Their reasons were given in a declaration, read in the name of all their delegates, which contained these words: 'The Orthodox Church adheres fixedly to the principle that the limits of individual liberty of belief are determined by the definitions made by the whole Church, which definitions we maintain to be obligatory on each individual. . . . Therefore the mind of the Orthodox Church is

usage some doctrines are said to be fundamental because they were explicit in the deposit of faith from the first; others are non-fundamental because originally implicit in fundamental doctrine, and drawn from it by the mind of the Church and so made explicit later. Both kinds of doctrine therefore are equally authoritative and to be believed, because both are revealed, but fundamental doctrines are like the foundations of a house and non-fundamental doctrines like its superstructure; the former *prior* to the latter. Yet both foundations and roof are integral parts of the house, so that the removal of the roof is the virtual destruction of the whole building. It is on these grounds that *Mortalium Animos* denies the validity of Bishop Gore's use of the distinction. See also Bishop Beck's exposition of the same point in his letter to *The Times* November 12, 1949, published in the reprint of the correspondence on *Catholicism Today*, page 30.

that reunion can take place only on the basis of the common faith and confession of the ancient undivided Church of the Seven Ecumenical Councils and of the first eight centuries. . . . This being so, we cannot entertain the idea of a reunion which is confined to a few common points of verbal statement; for according to the Orthodox Church, where the totality of the faith is absent there can be no *communio in sacris*.⁷

This position derives, like the principle enunciated in *Mortalium Animos*, from uncompromising belief that there can be only one true Church, undivided and indivisible. That this is the Orthodox faith concerning the unity of the Church is decisively stated in an equally authoritative declaration set out in the Ecumenical Survey issued in preparation for the Evanston Conference of the World Council of Churches: "The Orthodox Catholic Church believes wholeheartedly that she is not one of the many historic Christian Churches and confessions, but that she is herself "the" Church, that is the "one, holy, catholic, apostolic Church" of the holy symbol of the one faith, the one and only true and securely saving and infallible and orthodox Church [orthodox without marks of quotation], the Church that holds the Christian truth in all fullness and purity, and which truly, canonically and uninterruptedly prolongs, in a direct line, the primitive Church founded according to the will of the Tri-une God by Our Lord Jesus Christ, and expanded and organized by the Apostles."⁸

The basic attitudes of the Catholic and Orthodox Churches to the Ecumenical Movement are therefore identical, though, as we have seen, there is a difference of view as to what is expedient. The Holy See takes no part in ecumenical organization, a number of Orthodox delegates give it their co-operation. As Dr Nicholas Zernov notes, however, in his chapter on the Eastern Churches and the Ecumenical Movement in the twentieth century, the Edinburgh Conference on Faith and Order (1937), though '(it) marked considerable progress in the relations between the Orthodox and Lesser Eastern Churches and the Western Confessions, it made also more evident than before certain discomforts and disagreements felt by the Orthodox in their participation in Ecumenical work.'⁹ This, it would seem, is still so. The current issue

7 Rouse and Neill, *op. cit.*, page 655.

8 *Faith and Order: our oneness in Christ and our disunity as Churches*. Faith and Order Commission Paper No. 18. S.C.M. Press 1954, page 22.

9 Rouse and Neill, *op. cit.*, Chapter 14, page 660.

of *Sobornost*, the Journal of the Fellowship of St Alban and St Sergius, contains a comment on ecumenical encounter in Biblical Study, in which a tendency is noted, where the Reformed tradition predominates, for theological discussion to be confined to aspects of the Christian Faith which Protestants accept. The large agreement reached on these points leads to a tacit assumption that *only* these are properly speaking *de fide*, and everything else has a secondary or optional value. The Orthodox are thus hindered from bearing witness to the wholeness of Orthodoxy and the interdependence of its doctrines. Biblical study, approached in isolation from the whole question of Tradition and the *magisterium* of the Church, cannot but give a very partial and distorted presentation of the Orthodox and Catholic view of the biblical revelation. The writer of the comment holds that this produces a sense of frustration which is at the root of the apparent capriciousness of the Orthodox in supporting the World Council of Churches, and notes with approval the suggestion that a much more definite place should be given to Patristic studies in such discussions.¹⁰ Only in this way, so it seems to us, can World Protestantism be brought to face squarely the ultimate issue in the Ecumenical dilemma.

A very important element in the ecumenical dialogue is the question of membership of the Church. Orthodox theologians are less clear, and more heterogeneous, in their ideas about the relationship of schismatic and heretical Churches to Orthodoxy than are Catholic theologians about the relationship of non-Catholic Christians, and their organized allegiances, to the Catholic Church.¹¹ Yet even for Catholics official definition and guidance in this matter leaves much room for differences of emphasis and view. An examination of the parts of the Encyclical *Mystici Corporis* which deal with non-Catholics makes this evident. Its teaching concerning actual membership of the Church is clear and decisive, but the bearing of this upon the position of non-Catholics is more often a matter of inference than of positive statement, to be more fully elucidated, no doubt, by theological discussion. Thus *Mystici Corporis* says:¹² 'Only those are to be accounted

¹⁰ *Sobornost*, Winter 1955-56, pages 329-30.

¹¹ Dr Zernov has given some account of these differing views amongst the Orthodox in Rouse and Neill, *op. cit.*, pages 672 and 673.

¹² Latin text, *A.A.S.*, XXXV, page 193. English translation, *The Mystical Body of Jesus Christ* (C.T.S., London, 1948), page 16, paragraph 21.

really members of the Church who have been regenerated in the waters of baptism, and profess the true faith, and have not cut themselves off by their own unhappy act or been severed therefrom for very grave crimes by the legitimate authority.' The Latin word here translated *really* is *reapse*. It invites the inference that the Pope is speaking only of those who are members *in re*, with the implication that there are also other members who are such only *in voto*. The reference to the possibility of cutting oneself off from the Body by one's own unhappy act, closely linked as it is, in the same sentence, with excommunication, would seem to apply *only* to the lapsed, and not to those receiving baptism outside the Church, who continue, in good faith, in the religious body that gave it them; not, except in a remote and impersonal sense, an unhappy act.

The concluding words of the same paragraph of the Encyclical confirm this view: 'those who are divided from one another in faith or government cannot be living in the one Body, so described and by its one divine Spirit.' The copulative *and* in this passage is a translation of the Latin *atque*, which has the force of *and also*, or even *and at the same time*, thus implying that there are those who, though outside the visible Body, can live, nevertheless, in some sense, by its one divine Spirit, in virtue of membership *by desire* only. In a later passage in the Encyclical where the Pope is speaking of the Holy Spirit as the soul of the Mystical Body¹³ he says that 'it is he who, while by the inspiration of his grace giving ever new increase to the Church, refuses to dwell by sanctifying grace in members who are completely (*omnino*) severed from the Body'. Again the implication is that there are also members, partially severed from the Body, in whom he does not refuse so to dwell.

The final word in the Encyclical on this subject occurs in its third and concluding part.¹⁴ Addressing non-Catholics 'who do not belong to the visible structure of the Catholic Church' the Pope refers to the words in which, at the beginning of his Pontificate, he committed them to God's care and keeping. He now begs them 'to yield their free consent to the inner stirrings of God's grace and strive to extricate themselves from a state in which they cannot be secure of their own eternal salvation'. This security is

¹³ English translation, page 35, paragraph 55.

¹⁴ English translation, page 61, paragraph 102.

not the subjective security which depends upon the personal movement of the will in acceptance of God's grace, whenever and however bestowed, but the objective security provided by the divine guarantee of the Church, which gives certitude concerning its authority, and the faith and sacramental life of which it is the sole appointed guardian. The Pope goes on to give as the reason for this that while non-Catholics may be related to the Mystical Body of the Redeemer by a certain longing and even desire, unconscious though these may be (*etiamsi inscio quodam desiderio ac voto*), yet they lack those many great heavenly gifts and aids the use of which can be legitimately enjoyed (*frui licet*) only in the Catholic Church.¹⁵ The heavenly gifts and aids of which the Pope speaks are the fullness of divine authority, which ensures fellowship in the true Faith, and the secure guarantee of the whole range of sacramental life. These, the Encyclical emphasizes, are the means by which God's gift of salvation is mediated to men, and only within the visible structure and common life of the Mystical Body can they be found in their entirety, and with the security afforded by its authority.

Nowhere, however, does the Encyclical deny that outside the visible structure of the Church, authority, faith and sacramental life are to be found to some extent, but imperfectly and without the fullness of guarantee and security. All Christian allegiances are guided by the divinely inspired Scriptures which exercise a decisive authority over them as God's Word written, though an authority limited by diverse interpretation; many attribute authority also to the creeds and dogmatic decisions of 'undivided' Christendom; some possess valid orders; and nearly all by faithfully following their own usages can obtain the actual sacraments of baptism and matrimony. Indeed the Pope's reference to the heavenly gifts and aids, used legitimately only within the Church, would appear to grant this by implication. How far, and under what circumstances, do the organized Christian bodies commonly known as Churches play a part as corporate entities, under divine Providence, in bringing their members into union with Christ in his Mystical Body? How far is the faithful performance of dominical ordinances, invalid by Catholic standards, allowed by God, in

15 I have ventured at this point to make a few changes in the English translation of the Latin text in the *Osservatore Romano*, July 4, 1943. On comparing this translation with the more official text in the *Acta Apostolicae Sedis* I felt that these changes would bring out more clearly the meaning of the Latin there given.

response to the faith and good will of those who use them, to stand as an occasion of appropriate graces? How far, in the process of solving the ultimate ecumenical dilemma, can the traditions and ethos of the non-Catholic allegiances make a positive contribution to the accidental perfection of the Mystical Body? The fullness of truth and life is at all times possessed, guarded and communicated by the Church as such. Its accidental perfection lies in the manner in which that truth and life is apprehended and lived in the corporate life of its members, at any given moment in its history.

These questions are not touched upon in *Mystici Corporis*; they have clearly been left to be worked upon by the *schola theologorum*, and especially by those theologians who are sensitive to the ecumenical implications of the answers to them.¹⁶ Many converts, looking back upon past experience of grace received, can testify that the Christian allegiance in which they were brought up has indeed been, to adapt St Paul's word, a *paidogogos*¹⁷ to bring them to Christ in the fullness of the life of his Mystical Body on earth. That this can be a valid experience is confirmed by words in the Ecumenical Instruction, 'Non-Catholics may certainly be told that should they return to the Church, the good that the grace of God has already wrought in their souls will not be lost, but will be completed and brought to perfection.'¹⁸

Our separated brethren, engaging in the ecumenical dialogue, are sensitive about the experience of grace, and critical of what they conceive to be the intransigent attitude of the Church in regard to the validity of orders and sacraments. Their constant argument is that the ministry and ordinances of the different Christian allegiances have been manifestly and abundantly blessed; nor is any denial of this convincing. *The Times* leader summing up the correspondence on *Catholicism Today* was constrained to

16 The latest official comment on the teaching of the ordinary and universal magisterium, contained in *Mystici Corporis*, that there is no salvation outside the Church, is the Letter of the Holy Office to the Archbishop of Boston, August 8, 1949. This document is of special interest because it deals with a group of Catholics who were trying to insist upon a rigid interpretation of the dogmatic axiom, which would exclude from eternal salvation all united to the Church only by implicit desire. The letter affords further guidance to the theologian by its insistence that implicit desire, to be effective, can and must be such as to produce supernatural faith and charity, and can also obtain sacramental effects, when those divinely instituted helps to salvation are used only in desire and longing. See *The Irish Ecclesiastical Record*, August 1953, pages 132-135.

17 Galatians 3, 24.

18 English text in *The Tablet*, March 4, 1950, paragraph II, page 176.

remark that Roman Catholics are not in fact committed, as is widely believed, to the doctrine that all non-Roman Catholics are damned.¹⁹ There is revealed here a manifest gulf that can only be bridged by a Catholic theology at work upon the principles laid down in the great Encyclicals of recent years. A theology prepared to draw out from those principles and make abundantly clear to the non-Catholic world a soundly based account of what to countless non-Catholics of all allegiances is a widely prevalent, deeply felt and obviously true spiritual experience. Such a theology of *Deus non alligatur sacramentis, sed nos*, recognized as authentically Catholic, would do much towards pointing the way to the true and only solution of the ultimate ecumenical dilemma, which is so often regarded at present as a flat denial of that experience.

The serious study of *A History of the Ecumenical Movement* will give, it is much to be hoped, stimulus and encouragement to some of our younger theologians to adopt this line of development as their special concern.

¹⁹ *The Times*, November 29, 1949.