

# Reunion or Conversion<sup>1</sup>

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In recent months there has been controversy in the Catholic press casting doubt on the expediency of the 'reunion' or ecumenical work taking place within the Church, and promoted by the Secretariat for the Unity of Christians at the Vatican Council.<sup>2</sup> It is said to be drying up the normal inflow of conversions, because some potential converts are encouraged to stay where they are in order to work for eventual unity between the Church and their own dissident communion. It has been asserted, though the authority for this does not appear widely based, that in Germany, for this reason, there is a calculated refusal on the part of some priests to accept prospective converts for instruction and reception. Whatever the truth may be in this matter the question is certainly being asked by a number of priests and lay people in this country whether this new apostolate is not encouraging a kind of indifferentism, in the minds of Catholics, concerning the uniqueness of the one true Church as the way of salvation for all men and so hindering individual conversions.

The question came up for discussion at the Heythrop Conference and, as far as I know, the general conclusion reached was that the work of attracting, instructing and receiving individual converts, and the work of mutual penetration and understanding between ourselves and other Christians, which is the aim of ecumenical encounter, are specifically different from each other in technique and approach, but in the long run compatible because they are complementary. Catholic ecumenism is a preparation of the ground, on a wide and corporate scale, for a conversion to truth, which will ultimately lead by God's grace to unity in faith. The consequence of this would be the return of separated Christians to the existing and God-given unity of the Catholic Church. 'Making a convert', to use the common though not very apt expression,

<sup>1</sup>A paper read at Spode House to a group of priests, January 2-4, 1963

<sup>2</sup>'Reunion' is the official description of such work used in the *Instruction of the Sacred Congregation of the Holy Office to Local Ordinaries on the Ecumenical Movement* (Ecclesia Catholica) 1949. A.A.S. 42, No. 45: English translation, *The Churches and the Church*, Bernard Leeming, S.J., Appx, London, 1959. Ecumenical work, ecumenism, reunion or unity work are all convertible terms in this connection.

begins within this general approach, when enquiry into the Church's proclamation of its teaching becomes a matter of personal urgency in conscience, and individual instruction is sought; the nature of the approach changes at that point.

This article is not a full discussion, with conclusions reached, of the problem thus posed. It is intended to throw out certain considerations which will provide a starting point, and perhaps some guiding lines for a proper elucidation of it. In any such discussion the basis must be the principles of Catholic ecclesiology and their right application to the ecumenical situation as it has developed in recent years. The doubts the problem is causing are illustrated in a passage of a sermon preached by Archbishop Heenan at the laying of the foundation stone of a new Cistercian abbey in Northern Ireland last July. The Archbishop mentions this in his Introduction to *Christian Unity - A Catholic View*,<sup>3</sup> the paperback containing the lectures given at the Heythrop Conference.

'It is well known' he says 'that religious relations in Northern Ireland are delicate. Feeling even in the recent past has run deep. It seemed right and indeed obvious for me to tell my mixed audience of the new friendship which has sprung up elsewhere in these islands. I urged them to remember above all that they were brothers in Christ. I told them that being a Christian is more important than being a Catholic or a Protestant.' Commenting on this the Archbishop goes on to say that he was not intending to enunciate any theological principle, but merely to encourage friendship between Christians whose hostility has caused nothing but harm in the history of Ireland. It is true that no explicit principle was enunciated; but the Archbishop was recommending a charity amongst separated Christians, based on the profound theological principle that central and all embracing in the Christian faith is the truth that God wills all men to be saved, and that salvation is in and through Christ and him alone. 'There is no other name under heaven given to men whereby we must be saved' (Acts 4, 12).

By far the most important thing in human life is to be *in* Christ; to share the divine-human life of grace that is God's gift to men, apart from which there can be no salvation. This our separated brethren can and do share with us in virtue of their baptism. In this sense of being brothers in Christ, being a Christian comes before and is more important than being a Catholic or a Protestant. The Archbishop's words to his Irish congregation were well grounded in the teaching of the Church. It must be admitted however that his quoted sentence, as it

<sup>3</sup>Sheed & Ward, Stag Books, London 1962.

stood and out of context, was liable to misunderstanding, especially, by the uninstructed. He received many letters from Catholics drawing attention to the possibility of this, and he prints three of them in the Heythrop Report; from a lady, a priest and a layman. All three complain that non-Catholics might well deduce from his words that it is not really of any great importance to be a Catholic. 'The plain common sense meaning (of the words used) to ordinary men and women' says the priest, 'can only be that to be a Christian is something other than and over and above being a Catholic or Protestant, and it is time we put that something first.' That is the plain common sense meaning of the Archbishop's words, and their true meaning. It is true that our unity with our separated brethren, unity with Christ by baptism and grace, is something that should be put first, because truth and charity are primary. But that does not mean, as the priest implies in his letter, that they can be construed as saying that it is unimportant whether you are a Catholic or not. Next after being in Christ by grace it is of supreme importance that you should be a member, in the full sense, of the Catholic Church; visibly a member of the visible society. It is in fact a matter of spiritual life or death for those who know with certainty its necessity.

The reason for this is given in the Encyclical *Mystici Corporis*.<sup>4</sup> One of the few things this encyclical says about those outside the Church's visible structure is that they are in a situation whereby they cannot be secure of their own eternal salvation, because they are deprived of those many great gifts and aids (*munera* and *adjumenta*) which only those within its structure can legitimately enjoy. If I am not mistaken I think Cardinal Bea translates that word *munera* as graces. With deference to his great authority I believe that *gifts* is nearer the encyclical's meaning. What those outside the visible structure of the Church often lack are God's ordained *means* of grace, which are his gifts to it - primarily the Church itself, the fullness of truth it contains, the society and communion of its faithful, and very often most of its sacraments, its sacramentals and other lesser aids to devotion available only to those within the structure of the divine society. Nowhere I think does *Mystici Corporis* dogmatize as to what graces are given to those outside the visible structure of the Church, and not in possession of valid sacraments. All graces come from Christ in and through the Church which is his Body, but what graces are given by him, in virtue of desire

<sup>4</sup>A.A.S. XXXV, 1943, pages 193 ff: English translation *The Mystical Body of Christ*, C.T.S., 1943, page 61.

and good faith, outside the sacramental means he has ordained is wholly beyond our knowledge. *Deus non alligatur sacramentis, sed nos*, as the theological maxim phrases it.

Inculpable ignorance alone excuses from full membership of the Church and its necessity for salvation; and this entirely excludes *indifferentism* or belief that one 'Church' is as good as another. In the past, and even now, there is still a tendency to imply, in speaking of other Christians, that though good will and good faith can save them through the grace of Christ, they are very severely rationed in regard to it, in comparison with Catholics. In fact we do not know. All we do know is that sacraments are guarantees of specific graces, provided they are received with faith and good will. They are of immense help, because of their suitability to our human, body-soul condition, in moving the human will to the acceptance of the grace they offer and convey; without this sacramental efficacy the same graces, offered extra-sacramentally, might be refused, and in the end salvation lost. Nor do we know in what way invalid sacraments, received in obedience and faith, can be allowed by God to be occasions, rather than actually efficacious means, of grace. The whole matter is only finally resolved in the mystery of the interaction of human free will with grace. Our knowledge of what God does for man's salvation extends only to what has been revealed to us and beyond that must be left in his merciful hands.

It is necessary to note in discussing these questions that the truth of the possibility of salvation for those outside its visible structure became clearer in the mind of the Church by a growing realization of two truths; that sacraments can be received by *desire*, not only explicit but even implicit, and that an erroneous conscience, if sincere, must be obeyed. These two truths were seminally present from the first in the mind of the Church, but only gradually realized in all their applications, by a slow process of development. St Cyprian for instance, in the third century, considered his maxim *extra ecclesiam nulla salus* to mean quite literally that anyone outside the visible unity of the Church was *ipso facto* damned. He assumed that all such persons were in bad faith, sinning against the light. But in the twentieth century a group of priests and laity was condemned by the Holy Office<sup>5</sup> for maintaining a proposition similar to St Cyprian's.

<sup>5</sup>See the Letter of the Holy Office, usually called the Boston Letter, to the Archbishop of Boston, 8 August 1949. An English translation of the doctrinal portion of this letter will be found in *Approaches to Christian Unity*, Appendix II, by C. J. Dumont, O.P., London, 1959.

There can be no doubt then that the Church teaches that full membership of the visible structure of Christ's Mystical Body the Church is necessary to salvation, unless inculpable ignorance stands as an obstacle to the realization of this. There can be no doubt either that the Church's apostolate to the world is to maintain its members in their knowledge and living of the truth it preaches, and to dissipate inculpable ignorance, where it exists, by that preaching. From the beginning, that is, the Church has been an inveterate convert maker and must always be so. When groups of individuals have become detached by schism, heresy or apostasy from its unity, the Church, in intention, and by its very nature, has striven to recall them. In the same way it has also striven to bring into its fold the pagans who have never known the truth. Sometimes the means of winning back those who have deserted it have gone beyond the moral suasion of the preaching of the gospel, and have deteriorated into the use of force; the power and influence of the secular arm, persecution and even the fear of torture or the cruel death penalty. Yet in spite of these blots the Church has always been diligent in seeking converts; by nature it is missionary and by nature its true means of propagation has been the appeal to conscience by the preaching of the gospel of redemption in Christ.

Even when Christendom became divided by schism, when East and West parted and when the multiple schisms of the Reformation finally split the Christian world into hundreds of Churches, those Churches continued the missionary tradition of convert-making which had begun on the day of Pentecost, when 3,000 souls were baptized and added to the new-born Church (Acts 2, 41). The results, both heroic and terrible, of this have been that the gospel of Christ is still proclaimed throughout the world by scores of discordant voices, all speaking in the name of Christ, all at odds with each other about the nature of their authority for doing so, and all in consequence teaching different things. The unbeliever and the pagan, and many who once professed the name of Christ, have turned away from his gospel into indifference, materialism or some substitute religion. Meanwhile the voice of the true Church, commissioned to proclaim the fullness of the mind of Christ to the world, is almost drowned by these other voices; and even itself sometimes obscures its own message by language, customs and ways of approach, which belong to another age and environment, and even so are often made unnecessarily alien in their application to the world in which the Church of today finds itself.

Is it surprising how little progress the religion of Christ has made, how

many turn away from it? Or, from another point of view, it is surprising that, in view of all this, Christ's redeeming power exercises so strong an influence as it still does over the minds and hearts of men, divided though even his faithful followers are. The gospel is preached, the different 'Churches', as we have to call them, make their converts, each a small handful from the world around them, yet giving a genuine response of mind and heart and conscience to the Word of God to men. The Catholic Church makes gains by genuine conversion to the fullness of faith, yet it suffers also frightening losses, not through accession to other forms of Christianity, but nearly always through lapse into indifference to any coherent faith. Not only is this true in Britain, but in almost every country of the world. There are, no doubt, many causes for it, but surely there is an outstanding one. If all Christ's followers were one; if the Christian message of redemption and grace were given to the world by a single community bound into unity by love, with a single imperative message of good news pointing out clearly the way, the truth and the life, by the authentic interpretation of the mind and heart of Christ, how many millions now in darkness and uncertainty would come willingly in obedience to Christ's call, would respond in faith to the freedom by which Christ has made us free?

How many? We do not know. But surely many more than the relatively small handful which year by year augments the existing faithful, struggling to hold its own against the offset of the lapsed and the lost. What is true of ourselves in this is true also, in much the same measure, of many dissident Churches and their allegiance. Of course we must receive converts. We must above all preach the gospel in terms that will draw the uncommitted and the uncertain. Our message, of its nature, will be open to all, and we must encourage them to listen. When other Christians come to us we should answer their questions carefully, tell them to stay where they are and pray and think till conscience brings conviction that God wills them to move. Of course we have a duty, as far as may be, to provide them with the means of forming their consciences, but never to seek to make up their minds for them; that is God's work, the work of the Holy Spirit. Nor must we feel aggrieved because other Christians do the same, and even sometimes, in all sincerity, attract our own members. The only convert making that should be barred is unfair and shoddy means of persuasion, and the half-truths, and sometimes too the lies, of war-psychology, which emphasizes what the other side have not got (or what we make out that they have not got), and fails to take account of what in fact

they possess and cherish.

But more important than any convert making, and ultimately fundamental to all convert making, is the new and revolutionary element in the relationship of separated Christians to each other called the Ecumenical Movement; a relationship of friendship and understanding which has never before existed, on any such scale, in the history of divided Christendom. It began among Protestants at a great Missionary Conference held in Edinburgh in 1910. The Protestant Missionaries gathered there became convinced that the world would never be won for Christ until Christians were united in their witness. They resolved, there and then, to set on foot what has developed into a new technique of approach between separated Christians, a technique of friendship, the object of which is to discover, by true sympathy and understanding of one another, exactly the extent of the truth they hold in common, where the differences lie and just how radical those differences are.

This cannot be done by controversy, in the ordinary sense, because normally controversy is a contest, to win a victory over each other; and the desire for victory breeds war-psychology. It produces an unwillingness to understand or even to listen. What is needed is discussion from which all the animus of getting the better of your opposite number, all war-psychology is eliminated, and where patient listening and trying to understand each other's idiom of thought and language is substituted for it. This eirenic attitude is determined, on both sides, by the effort to get at the truth in each other's positions and see exactly where the divergence lies and why it is there.

The Ecumenical Movement from 1910 onwards grew quickly. At first it paid more attention to co-operating with each other and getting to know each other in practical good works. But gradually it came to be seen that there can be no lasting Christian unity without unity in faith. The *Faith and Order* movement, which deals with theological differences at a deep level, has become a most important part of the ecumenical scene. It is true to say that the movement has become world wide, and that its growing stress on the importance of unity in truth has enabled the authority of the Catholic Church to see great possibilities in it, and to co-operate with its work in many ways, though not engaging in its official organization. At New Delhi in 1961 the World Council of Churches, the great central assembly of the movement, welcomed delegates from one hundred and ninety-eight churches, from fifty different countries of the world. Every nation and colour was

represented, and besides the Protestant majority representatives came from the Anglicans, Orthodox, Greek and Russian, and a number of ancient churches of the East, such as the Syrians of Armenia, and the Copts of Egypt. For the first time in ecumenical history the Holy See itself appointed official observers at the New Delhi assembly, who were treated with the utmost courtesy and friendliness.

This assembly passed with very few dissentients a declaration of its overall aim in working for unity. The declaration stated that this aim was organic unity in a single church, in which one apostolic faith and sacramental life would be achieved, one apostolic ministry acknowledged, all its parts united with each other in communion, and its teaching assented to by all. Of course the enormous underlying differences are there; they are still quite intractable, especially as, at high level, the World Council of Churches has always insisted that the Catholic Church should be included in official ecumenical thinking. Nevertheless this declaration is an immense advance on the ideas, which characterized ecumenism in its beginning, when doctrine, apart from the central truth of redemption, took a very secondary place. It is a great advance towards unity that this vast and highly differentiated assembly can today so widely share an ideal which gives organic unity, in faith, community and government, a primary and decisive place.

There is far less tendency today in the ecumenical movement to water down doctrine and reach a least common denominator of agreed truth; that is becoming a thing of the past. It is because of this that under the Pope's leadership the Church is entering into what is called the ecumenical dialogue with other Christians, and this in an atmosphere of friendship and desire to understand, which twenty years ago would have been unthinkable on so wide a scale.

On their part Catholics must be prepared to give the fullest possible emphasis to the recognition of the fact, a soundly based theological fact, that dissident Christians can be and are in Christ by grace; that in many Christian bodies Catholic truths once rejected are gaining their place again. This is largely due to the thorough work over the years of the *Faith and Order* Commission. We are not able to give recognition to these dissident bodies as Churches, because of their separation from the Church's unity, but we can and should gladly recognize that they are under the ordinary guidance of God's providence and the influence of the Holy Spirit, and that they do contain certain 'vestigia' or elements of what belongs by right to the true Church; the Bible, parts of the tradition which interprets it, some sacraments, the ancient creeds and



so on; 'a splinter from a gold-bearing rock', Pius XII is reported to have said, 'itself may contain much gold.'

We should give the fullest possible recognition to the fact that these religious communions in spite of their errors do play no inconsiderable part in bringing their members to Christ. At Heythrop Cardinal Bea in his final address spoke some memorable words:

'Should we leave Protestants to themselves almost with the hope that they will dissolve and disappear? Such an attitude would be most un-Christian. Far from desiring this, our attitude ought to be one of joyful readiness to help them to make their own religious life effective, and to let them have every possible assistance from our pastoral experience.'<sup>6</sup>

The attitude of Christians to each other is undergoing a startling transformation. It is changing from one of suspicion and hostility to one of sympathy and friendship, and this without any surrender of principle on either side. In such an atmosphere the ecumenical dialogue as it is called can take place, flourish and bear fruit.

Its aim is to understand the position of the other side, and to secure that our own doctrine is understood by them. This takes much effort and is by no means easy, because we have to see the religious beliefs of others from within, and in doing so we begin to understand their religious convictions and appreciate their positive insights. This leads to another discovery. We become aware that our own positions have suffered some distortion through long centuries of controversy. Defence always means over-emphasis, and we have tended to over-emphasize what has been attacked, and to under-emphasize or lose sight of the things Protestants have most valued. We find that Protestant criticism usually puts its finger on real weaknesses in the life of the Church, and shows us how in practice we are not as faithful to the gospel and the Church's tradition as we ought to be. Ecumenical dialogue becomes in this way an instrument of renewal in life and thought.

And it is so also for the other Christians with whom we carry on the dialogue. They learn gradually to see that Catholicism has a real and a clear vision of the gospel of Christ and their whole tone in talking about Catholics changes. Since many who take part in these dialogues are teachers of theology the new atmosphere rapidly spreads to their students, and eventually reaches ministers and other teachers. Another discovery these theologians are making is that they too are influenced by the controversy of the past, and that there are areas of biblical faith,

<sup>6</sup>*Christian Unity: A Catholic View*, p. 188.

especially in regard to the Church and the sacraments which have been neglected in the past. Calm discussion in a peaceful setting, where one is not indulging in controversial argument or trying to convert each other, becomes an instrument of recovering valuable truths that have been lost. The dialogue is also a source of renewal for other Christians.<sup>7</sup>

This is the ground in which God can plant the seeds of faith and make them grow. Experience shows that this is happening. How will it end? We only know one thing for certain, and that is, that the substance of the Church's Faith and structure is unchangeable, its outward aspect and clothing, its customs and ceremonies have changed in the past and may well change again. It will of course be a long and laborious process this change, stretching perhaps over generations into a world almost completely different from our own. It will certainly be an evolution, under the guidance of the Church's magisterium; partly by individual conversion, partly perhaps by a corporate development of faith within the dissident Churches themselves, which will at last bring them into the unity of the Mystical Body of Christ. It will come, if it comes and to the extent that it comes, provided by God's grace we can change the hostility and indifference of the past into positive and active charity for our separated brethren. Only such charity can prepare the ground for the change, and for a wide resurgence of Catholic faith which the power of God can bring about, if we do our part.

I am indebted for the substance of the above two paragraphs to an article in the *Clergy Review*, October 1962, *Ecumenical Dialogue or Conversion* by Father Gregory Baum, O.S.A.