

# Forty Ecumenical Years by Henry St John O.P.

It is not quite forty years since I produced my first published writing concerned with Christian unity; it was a review article on the Report of the Malines Conversations, which the then editor of *Blackfriars* asked me to undertake, soon after I finished my studies for the priesthood. But my thought and ideas about ecumenism – the clumsy word had not then been invented – have deep roots in my Anglican background. I have always been profoundly grateful for the religion I was grounded in by the Church of England; and that I was able to take it with me into the Catholic Church whole and entire. With a minimum of detailed adjustment – but a complete re-orientation of mind – I was received, without conditional baptism, in 1917.

What I took with me was a religion essentially biblical and liturgical. From earliest childhood – in our daily family service at home, and in similar daily services at school and at Cambridge, I learned to recite the psalter and listen to the Scriptures of the Old and New Testaments. Built into this biblical background was the training, more by atmosphere and surroundings than by explicit teaching, of a happy home life, in a large family, with parents at the heart of whose religious practice was the deep personal love of Christ characteristic of the sober Tractarianism of Keble and Newman.

It was not however a religion uncritically biblical. At Cambridge I sat under Professors F. C. Burkitt, Bethune-Baker and Gwatkin, and later on, during a year at Oxford, under Scott Holland and Darwell Stone – I was also closely in touch with the *Foundations* group. We certainly wrestled with the problems of contemporary Anglicanism. But, like Ronald Knox, I remained orthodox, though more favourably inclined than he was to the positions of Bishop Gore. But it was while an undergraduate at Cambridge that I first encountered explicitly the ecumenical idea. I had several friends who were members of the Student Christian Movement and was persuaded, rather against my inclination (for I was resolutely Anglo-Catholic), to attend in the summer vacation of 1910 a camp at Baslow in Derbyshire organized by the movement.

There students from many countries and of many allegiances met in conference, under the leadership of such famous ecumenical figures as J. H. Oldham and Tissington Tatlow. In lectures and study groups ecumenical themes were discussed, and this opened to me a new world. I

encountered for the first time, on the level of religion, Presbyterians, Free Churchmen and Evangelical Anglicans. The seeds of the ecumenical idea were sown in my mind in a ground prepared by my biblical Anglican background.

The seeds however were some time in germinating. A Theological College course, subsequent ordination and apprenticeship as a curate in parochial work left little time for the development of that particular line of thought. During the next two years, many ideas, previously glimpsed and only half seen, crystallized into a settled conviction that from New Testament times the 'Great Church' had regarded itself as a visible organism, unique and indivisible. As it was then, so it must be now. Either Rome or Constantinople must be in the right. The Reformation idea of a divided Church was clean contrary to the verdict of antiquity.

Much reading, thought and prayer and some anguish of mind followed, but at last, in 1916, the decision was made. For me it meant immediate enlistment and training in the army, and in six months the trenches and shellholes of Flanders. Soon after demobilization I entered the Dominican Order and started my eight years training for that vocation. During the second half of this period the Malines Conversations were in progress, 1921–1925. I was deeply interested. Even in those days I saw that the spirit, intentions and method on both sides were admirably eirenic, but their subject-matter was mismanaged and so was the publicity that was given to it, with the result that the Conversations misfired and ended in creating something of a furore.

During this time of controversy I involved myself in a battle royal with the editor of the *Tablet*, Mr Ernest Oldmeadow. The cause was my support of this view of the Malines Conversations and of the spirit and intentions, though not all the conclusions, of a small book published about this time by a certain 'Father Jerome', who was a pioneer of what is now known as ecumenism. I was agreeably surprised by the letters I received from numerous Catholics, lay people known and unknown, applauding my point of view.

For some time before this Father Vincent McNabb had warmly supported, in speaking and writing, the idea that the Church of England was to be taken seriously and needed to be understood. He was a lone figure, but wonderfully courageous in speaking the truth in love, and his articles in *Blackfriars* are still of great interest. Father Hugh Pope, too, Regent of Studies at Hawkesyard during my student days, was a stimulating influence. He was deeply interested in the Church of England, though not always according to knowledge, and for a number of years he ran a group, which met in Birmingham, nicknamed 'The Mixed Bathing', in which Catholic and Anglican clergy, and sometimes Free Church ministers, met for eirenic discussion of agreements and differences. Such was the force of his personality that he managed to rope in several

elderly hard-bitten Birmingham diocesan clergy for this enterprise. These two Dominicans were the only priests in England at that time in any way vocal in the cause of unity, though Father Bede Jarrett, the Provincial, was sympathetic to their ideas.

I have always been glad that I read History at Cambridge, it gave me, very early, an idea of the importance of historical theology. I learned much from F. C. Burkitt, and H. M. Gwatkin introduced me to Christology and the Arian controversy. Under him I read Newman's *Arians*, and later *The Essay on Development of Doctrine*, though Gwatkin did not introduce me to that. It did not shake me at the time, but within two years, when I was attending Darwell Stone's lectures on the ministry in the primitive Church, I began to see where it was leading me, and in the end it was this book more than any other that brought me at last into the Church.

During our studies at Hawkesyard and particularly during the years of theology, I was struck by the lack of historical emphasis in the way the theology of St Thomas was taught, when so much in the text was susceptible of historical treatment. Remembering Bethune Baker's lectures at Cambridge and his interest in what Nestorius was really after, and the excellent course on the XXXIX Articles, especially the Trinitarian and Christological ones, given at Ely Theological College by Canon H. L. Goudge, I began to read Newman's historical studies, and other works mainly by Anglicans. I acquired some insight into the pressures of history on the life of the Church as it passed down the centuries, and this led me to the Reformation and to the multiple and complex causes that lay behind it.

Such studies, untutored and rather sporadic, have been my intellectual pre-occupation ever since, and have gradually shaped my ideas on the immense importance of the ecumenical approach in the cause of Christian unity. I have never ceased to be grateful for my Dominican education. It gave me, no philosopher, a rational pattern of thinking, which was a discipline, without being an inhibition, for the study of theology and a fair picture of what speculative theology should be. I became convinced that a theologian without a keen awareness of history was not in fact a real theologian at all.

By 1927 I was a busy schoolmaster at Laxton, and there, including my time in the Junior School at Llanarth, I remained for twenty-seven years, twenty-two of them with the additional responsibility of superior and headmaster. It was a busy and absorbing time. Apart from regular and generally full-time teaching I was pre-occupied with the problems of what true education in fact involves, and in trying to put into effect, at least in part, what I and my Dominican colleagues believed in.

In pursuit of things ecumenical I burned a lot of midnight oil and did a considerable amount of writing and lecturing. I devoted much vacation

time to the latter and to ecumenical studies. The literature even then was extensive. A group of my articles written between 1928 and 1954 was combined into a book and published as *Essays in Christian Unity*. It is still in circulation, but the very considerable amount I have written since then, both in England (mainly in *Blackfriars*) and in America, has not been reissued, and most of it, in these quick-moving days, is too ephemeral and dated to be so. The amount of lecturing I have been able to do has also more than doubled since those days. In all this I have been fortunate in having the advice and unfailing assistance of friends, chiefly, but by no means only, of two, Dominican theologians; Father Thomas Gilby, my contemporary, and the late Father Victor White, three years my junior in the Order. What I have learned from them in discussion, criticism and through their writings is a debt I can only repay with gratitude.

It was in 1936 that the thought of entering upon what is now known as ecumenical dialogue, with a group of Anglicans, first occurred to me. It arose out of a friendly correspondence over an article of mine in *Theology*, with the late Father Gabriel Hebert of the Society of the Sacred Mission, Kelham, the well known Anglican biblical scholar and liturgist. We met and planned together what became a series of conferences, now twelve in number, which started in 1937 and have gone on apart from the 1939 war years, till now, and are still projected for the future. It was agreed that Laxton should be our centre, and three meetings took place in the summer vacations in 1937, 1938 and 1939.

For the first two the Anglican representatives were all from Kelham, Father Stephen Bedale, Father Gabriel Hebert and Brother George Every. On the Dominican side Father Thomas Gilby, Father Victor White, Father Gerald Vann and myself. These meetings were all held with the blessing and approval of the Dominican Provincial and the diocesan bishop, Mgr Youens. The authority of Bishop and Provincial has been behind all our meetings since. It had been agreed that the subjects for discussion should not be immediately controversial, primarily concerned with questions of jurisdiction and order. We were determined to dig deeper and probe the nature of dogma and of revelation; the relation of dogmatic formulation to the *res revelata*; of Scripture, God's Word, to the believing community, which is the Body of God's Word; the nature of grace, which incorporates us into the mystical Body of God's Word, his eternal Son.

So we launched our effort. It has persisted over the years, but has not greatly spread. The Jesuit Fathers under the inspiration of Father Maurice Bévenot, who was a member of our fourth meeting, started a similar group with the Anglican Benedictines of Nashdom. This, I believe, lasted for some time, but has not been continued. Dom Columba Cary-Elwes ran a northern group at Ampleforth and this flourished till he departed to

the United States to make a new Benedictine foundation. It does not now exist. It is much to be hoped that, with the impetus of the Vatican Council and its Constitution *de Ecumenismo*, this kind of encounter will begin to make progress in the coming year. Already much work of an ecumenical nature has begun at university and professional level, under the aegis of the Newman Association and similar organizations, and in a few places at parochial level. There is much latent enthusiasm. It needs leadership. It would seem that the time is come for the erection of a committee or secretariate under the episcopate to promote, guide and co-ordinate it.

Unfortunately only the Report of the first Laxton Conference has survived. Brother George Every has kindly managed to unearth it from his archives. It consists of a summary of proceedings with abstracts of the papers read and the discussions following them. The papers read were 'Christian Truth and Formulas' by Father Thomas Gilby, O.P.; 'Revelation' by Brother George Every, S.S.M.; 'Belief and Authority' by Father Victor White, O.P., and a corresponding paper by Father Gabriel Hebert, S.S.M., with the same title. In view of the debates of Vatican II on the relation of conceptual formulation to the revelatory events, and of the consequent relation of Tradition to Scripture, it is interesting to recall what was being said to each other by Anglicans and Catholics in 1937.

A reading of the summary comments on both sides, in this report of our first encounter, shows there was a good deal of agreement; on the necessity for positive theological statement, as showing the manifested unity of the Church (an acknowledged Anglican lack), and on the danger, especially Roman Catholic, of a purely logical development of dogma, tending to substitute our own ideas of how God acts and has acted, for humble study of what he has actually done. This leads on to the crucial question: how do we know? how is God's Word to us mediated? By Scripture *above* the Church, judging it by the Spirit? Or by Scripture *within* the Church, the Believing Community, possessing it and interpreting it by the leadership of the same Spirit? And so the crucial question is at least adumbrated. What is the nature and function of the Church Christ founded and especially the nature of its visible unity?

The war made a gap in the Laxton meetings. In the third, August 1939, members drawn from elsewhere than the two original communities were brought in, Father Geoffrey Curtis, C.R. came from Mirfield, Dom Gregory Dix from the Anglican Benedictines of Nashdom and Dom Christopher Butler, now Abbot of Downside. When the conferences were resumed in 1947 the Anglican side was taken over by Mirfield and has so continued. After Father Geoffrey, the late Dr Lionel Thornton was the most constant attendant. He was a member of the Archbishops' Doctrinal Commission, and a truly great biblical theologian, even though he seemed to many to push the possibilities of typological interpretation to fascinating but rather

dubious lengths. On our side, apart from a considerable list of Dominicans, among whom Father Ian Hislop was and still is notable, Mgr H. Francis Davis and Father Maurice Bévenot have been members.

Father Geoffrey Curtis has, I believe, attended every meeting from 1939 down to that held at Mirfield last June. We began soon after the war to alternate as hosts between Laxton (and later Hawkesyard) and Mirfield. Hawkesyard and the younger Dominicans are now carrying on their own ecumenical work, as well as that of the original Laxton Conferences. Much of this is done at Spode House, under the leadership of Father Conrad Pepler, and it is a work of ecumenism from many differing approaches. I will mention only one, because in a sense it is specially my own concern; the annual Priests' Ecumenical Conference held early in January. It meets to discuss theological and other problems from an ecumenical point of view. It started eight years ago, and increases yearly in interest and numbers. And, not only Hawkesyard, but the Cambridge Blackfriars, the headquarters for Dominican publications, has become a vigorous centre of writing and lecturing in the wider ecumenical sense. In default of further surviving records of the Laxton Conferences and their continuation at Hawkesyard, I quote from a general survey of our proceedings which Father Geoffrey Curtis has kindly written for me.

'During the earlier years, both at Laxton and here at Mirfield, we avoided discussion on specifically controversial subjects. We discussed the great doctrinal themes of the Nicene Creed. We found a deep harmony with regard to the primary truths, but in every case a difference of attitude. The Catholic theologians, because of their unbroken tradition, had a clear and distinct picture to give of the Church's belief. This was deeply impressive in its constancy and range. But it had the defects of its qualities. Again and again we felt that philosophy was taking the dominating and controlling part that should be played by Scripture and the creeds.

'We Anglicans felt ashamed, some of us, of having no philosophical discipline in our outlook. We found ourselves relying too much on the reflexions of this or that contemporary sage. But our own contributions were always deeply rooted in Holy Scripture and written with deep respect for the interpretation of Scripture found in the Fathers. In the years before the war we were told by our Catholic friends that such a view point was deeply interesting and belonged to the field of "positive theology", a field that was only now being opened up.

'This was clearly not the *genre* of theology which provided the nourishment in ordinary seminary studies, but it has made intelligible discussion between us more easy. It remained, however, deeply regrettable that the scope of our theology is limited by the absence of a sound tradition in philosophy. Fortunately we had from the beginning, though it only became later explicit, one great common bond in the border-land

between philosophy and theology. Anglican moral theology is radically based upon the teaching of St Thomas Aquinas. This has been admirably brought out by the refounder of our moral theology, the late Bishop Kenneth Kirk of Oxford.

'The nature of the Church and Sacraments was our favourite theme of discussion; the great theme that at once unites and divides us. There is the vital question of the relation between the Mystical Body of Christ and the visible hierarchical Church. Here again we Anglicans seemed to find congenial emphasis in St Thomas Aquinas, who has no treatise on the visible Church. But we have profited by being asked many searching questions by his contemporary brethren.

'We seem to have approached the great question of the doctrine of the Church and the doctrine of the Eucharist again and again from different angles. The encyclical *Mystici Corporis* proved at once enriching and baffling; a halting place in ecclesiology analogous to the dogma of Chalcedon, which by some minds is seen less as a conclusive definition than as a challenge to further thought. Over the course of the years the growth of mutual understanding had already vindicated the conviction of the inaugurator and fosterer of our meetings, Father Henry St John, that "the method and spirit of Malines was the chief hope of unity".

'Then the new day – spring visited us. "The old Pentecostalist at the Vatican," as a Scottish Dominican described Pope John XXIII, has given us, on both sides, great encouragement and new confidence. Things that our Dominican brethren intimated with infinite discretion are now declaimed loudly by progressive cardinals and their fellow-bishops in the Council of the Vatican. Now that the episcopate has revived and that there is a real hope of re-interpreting papal infallibility and sovereignty in terms of the theology of the servant, there seems little that can long divide us. We find it possible to discuss papacy, episcopacy and conciliarity with great mutual profit and a great sense that each of these elements has its essential part to play in the life of the people of God.'

'There seems little that can long divide us.' Yes, if the whole Anglican Communion thought as Father Geoffrey and his confrères think, and if what the progressive cardinals and bishops are saying results in a renewal of the life of the whole Catholic Church. But, as I have often said, the Anglican Communion is a microcosm of the whole of divided Christendom and contains within its borders most of the differing elements that make up the World Council of Churches. As I look back over the years I become more and more deeply convinced that in the providence of God the Church of England has a particular vocation, to bring together into organic unity the Catholicity of East and West and the Protestantism of Reformation Christendom. It contains many elements of each of these two opposites.

But the road to that unity will be long and arduous, with many

seemingly insuperable obstacles on the human side, and needing tremendous graces on the divine side. Much has already been achieved. Some Churches, and perhaps in time many, are achieving unity on the basis of the institution and framework of episcopacy (without however the fullness of its inner sacramental reality), which the churches of the Anglican communion are prepared to hand on. It is possible too that within the next half century Rome, Constantinople and the East in general will also have achieved organic unity on the basis of the terms once agreed, in very different circumstances, at the Council of Florence in 1439; the rights of the patriarchates recognized and fully implemented on one side, and the universal primacy of the Holy See acknowledged on the other.

The primacy as defined by Vatican I, yet now seen in the context of *collegiality*, and particularly in relation to the principle of *subsidiarity*; this is the principle by which higher authority is limited, in practice, as with a bishop over his parish priests, to clearly defined occasions when the problem is beyond the scope of the lower authority, or when the well-being of the whole is touched. In this context the primacy would be seen by all to be a service, rather than a domination, necessary by God's ordinance for the security of the true unity of the Body of Christ as a whole.

Were this to come about united Catholicism and united Protestantism would be brought face to face. There lies the crux of the whole problem, the last long stretch of the road to unity and by far the biggest obstacle to its final achievement. It may well be that the Anglican Communion, with its understanding of Protestantism as it is lived, and its near-Catholic structure of episcopacy and sacramental life, would find itself in the position of intermediary, belonging to both sides, yet fully of neither. All this could be possible with a growing desire for unity, in a fast changing world, grown weary of the chaos and lack of purpose in human living. It might mean long and difficult dialogue, it might mean years of patient effort and good will on both sides; but it could happen at last. To bring it about would need deep and determined renewal in every Christian Church, our own included, and an intense concentration of prayer and self-sacrifice. The grace of God for it will surely not be withheld, though it might be rejected. *Caritas Christi urget nos*.

Note *The Editor asked me for this article and suggested the title. It could not fail to be auto-biographical; I hope it does not appear egoistic. I have named only one or two of the friends whose help has been constant, there are many others who have been my colleagues, without whom what has been achieved would have been impossible. To them, unnamed, I am also deeply grateful.*

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