

# New Blackfriars

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■ The last days of the Vatican Council's third session were a sharp disappointment to those who had hoped for a definitive vote on the decree on religious liberty, for this issue above all others had come to symbolize the Council's fidelity to Pope John's aims for the Council in the beginning. His conviction that 'divine providence is leading us to a new order of human relations' seemed somehow to have been forgotten in the maze of procedure; his hope that 'everything, even human differences, must lead to the greater good of the Church' to have been muted by the tactics of delay.

But the perspectives of history – and certainly those of grace – are not those of a particular debate, and what matters most has already been achieved. The decrees on the Church and on ecumenism are the proof of it. And when the decree on religious liberty is finally passed – as surely it will be – the fourth session will be the crown of a work that was, in Pope John's mind, to be above all one of reconciliation.

That is why the decree on ecumenism, far-reaching as its implications are, is not the Council's only ecumenical document. The whole process of renewal to which the Church is now committed is reflected in the Council's very existence. Even the differences of opinion, the tensions that reform inevitably brings, are the mark of a true awakening. They have silenced for ever the charge that the Church was indifferent to the world beyond her frontiers, for in every debate – however domestic its subject might appear to be – the need for a frank encounter with the modern world was emphasized.

Thus the training of the clergy is more than a matter of internal discipline within the Church. Unless priests are aware of their vocation as essentially apostolic, outward-looking, seeking always for the points of entry within the modern world which can assure the presence of Christ among men, they can relapse into the sort of sheltered privilege which anti-clericalism can justly condemn. The religious life, no less, is at the service of the Church and of all men. Its reform must always be in terms of eliminating the obstacles – and time and an inherited tradition can make them powerful – which hinder the sort of availability which religious, however cloistered, must seek. And the laity, most of all, have the opportunity of commending the truths of God to men through their

daily work in the world. It is they who can implement the purpose of the Council at the levels which the theologians cannot reach.

In this issue Father Henry St John writes of the ways in which, in a much less benign climate than we now enjoy, the patient work of theological dialogue has gone on over the years. And it is important to acknowledge efforts such as these which have established the method and mood of exchanges that now can greatly expand. Above all, as the Bishop of Bristol makes clear in speaking of Abbé Couturier, the primacy of prayer is absolute. No one can measure the effect of one man's work, and the resolute confidence of a Lyons priest of no outward importance is a shining example of the prophetic voice that prevails in the end.

■ It is never easy to move out of familiar structures that have long been taken for granted. Liturgical changes are in themselves but a marginal comment on the total process of religious renewal. Yet even they can demand an effort of adjustment, a sacrifice of personal preference to a sense of the general good. But what is needed is not the mere motions of conformity to a new style of speech or action. There must be an inner awareness of the dimensions of the new territory that the Council has opened, not only to Catholics but to all men who seek the truth. In St Augustine's words, 'We must search as those who expect to find: we must find as those who would search further'.

And this demands the constant conviction that prayer is not just a means to the end of union, peace and reconciliation. In a real sense the unity of all Christians, of all who believe in God, is already effected in so far as they make Christ's prayer their own. This was the inspiration behind Abbé Couturier's observance of the universal week of prayer from January 18 to 25 each year, for 'the walls of division do not reach as far as heaven'. To some Catholics it might seem that the original Church Unity Octave, established more than fifty years ago by the Revd Spencer Jones, an Anglican, and by Father Wattson, the American founder of the Friars of the Atonement, was diluted by the abbé's extension of its aims. But he was surely right to insist that those who took part in it should do so without reservations, for prayer is already a unity in desire, a shared understanding of the demands made on us by the charity of Christ.

The week of prayer will be observed this January by more people than ever before, and, one may believe, with a deeper awareness of its meaning. This is not the least of the fruits of the Council. And increasing opportunities for prayer in common, which at a public level are a matter for local bishops to regulate, should give a greater reality to a common purpose. For the unity that is prayed for is not merely the acceptance of a juridical formula: it is an identification with Christ and with his will that all men should be one in him. Some words of the present Archbishop of Canterbury (in an address to the Fellowship of St Alban and St

Sergius in 1960) might well be in the minds of all who take part in this month's prayers. 'The sin of disunity is but one aspect of the sinfulness of the members of the Body of Christ frustrating the fulfilment of the prayer of our Lord. Disunity is one aspect of this, lack of holiness is another aspect, and failure to grasp the truth and to present it in simplicity and clarity is another. What is wrong with Christendom is not only that we are divided, it is also that we lack holiness and that we play about with truth. And that being so, it is entirely insufficient to think and talk about reunion unless at the same time we are thinking and talking about reconstruction and recovery of the fulness of truth.'

■ Prayer is the primary work but it cannot be used as an escape from the hard and long task of a true dialogue between Christians. That is why Canon Bernard Pawley's *Anglican-Roman Relations* (Church Information Office, 3s) is valuable, as well as being a fitting record of his work as the Anglican Archbishops' liaison officer in Rome. He pays generous tribute to the genuine desire for renewal which has marked the Council's sessions, but he recognizes the need for a candid appraisal of the differences that have to be overcome. It can be a painful duty to rehearse them, and the legacy of history is a cruel one. But, he insists, 'the errors and scandals of history are not the fault of the present generation: their only fault can be that of wanting to persevere in the divisions caused by the past, or of being unwilling to rethink the cause of division right to their depths'.

It is essential that the Council's aims should be realistically assessed in terms of the legacy of the past and of the doctrinal differences that remain. It is precisely this openness of approach that will give the ecumenical encounters of the future the sense of a common search for the truth in charity that must replace the old polemics. Canon Pawley's plea is salutary, and it is to be hoped that, as the Archbishop of Canterbury's Commission on Roman Catholic Relations sets to work, there may be a generous response from the English Catholic hierarchy to its initiatives. Archbishop Heenan has already publicly committed the bishops of England and Wales to take the fullest possible part in the ecumenical movement, and Canon Pawley's pamphlet, partial as some of its emphases inevitably are, is a welcome statement of some at least of the questions that have to be discussed and a pointer to the spirit in which any Christian encounter should take place.

■ Among the legal reforms that can be expected of the Labour Government, the abolition of capital punishment can claim high priority. Even though it must depend on a private member's initiative, the urgency of the issue is widely recognized if only because of the unacceptable compromise that is embodied in the present Homicide Act.

The history of the battle for ending the death penalty has been an unsatisfactory one in which prejudice and emotion have masked the facts. An abstract right to take life can be conceded: there are arguments that can be held to justify the use of this ultimate sanction by the state in the interests of its security. But such academic arguments bear no relation to the issue now. The only justification for retaining capital punishment would be its proved effectiveness as a deterrent. There is no such proof, nor can there be.

But the end of the death penalty will mean the beginning of serious consideration of the alternative. And that means a new approach to the whole process of imprisonment. The Royal Commission that has been set up to enquire into penal treatment has terms of reference that are wide enough to include a radical look at the whole basis of legal punishment: not merely *how* it is to be administered, but *why*. The extreme case of murder is not exempt from such considerations, even though a legal recognition of the particular gravity of the crime of murder may mean a much longer sentence than – as now – a nominal 'life' sentence of nine years or so.

Much of the confusion and ineffectiveness of penal treatment, not only in Britain but in other countries as well, is due to a fundamental uncertainty about the whole purpose of punishment. No amount of penal reform, whether it be in terms of improved prisons, better-trained officers or realistic programmes of employment, can be effective unless it consciously embodies a consistent intention – which, in the Prison Rules of England and Wales, is directly reformatory. The purpose of prison is to enable the prisoner 'to lead a good and useful life'. And this will become increasingly important if, after the abolition of capital punishment, there are men who are likely to spend long years in confinement.

If the declared purpose of imprisonment is to enable the prisoner to spend his time in a positive and not merely a punitive environment, then much will have to be done to remove those features of prison life which of necessity make such an achievement impossible. And it is here that what is done in practice needs to be related to what is really intended. The tension, morally speaking, between the concept of punishment and that of rehabilitation has as yet to be properly resolved.