

PROBLEMS IN A THEOLOGY OF ECUMENISM

Let me begin by expressing my thanks to Father Van Ackeren, and through him to the Catholic Theological Society of America, for the rare privilege of appearing on your program. The fact that this would not have happened even a few years ago is a symbol of how rapidly the relationship of Catholics to Protestants is changing, and it also gives me a rather overwhelming sense of the burden of responsibility I have taken upon myself in accepting your generous invitation.

I am conscious not only of a content-burden, but of a time-burden as well. Father Van Ackeren said "Thirty minutes," and on this occasion I am, of course, bound to him by holy obedience. Indeed, a Catholic friend of mine who had attended a number of different Protestant services, and finally went to one at which I preached, asked me afterwards, "Why is it that you Presbyterians preach so much longer than other ministers?" To which, of course, the only honest answer was, "We don't; it only seems longer."

What I want to do in my already dwindling time is to say a bit about the overall meaning of ecumenism, as I understand it, and then, assuming we agree that Ecumenism Is A Good Thing, discuss three problems that seem to me to emerge for examination.

THE TWO MEANINGS OF *oikoumene*

Let us begin with the word itself—a word used indiscriminately these days to describe everything from a Baptist boy and a Catholic girl having an ice cream soda together, through learned discussions about the possibility that maybe-Anglican-orders-are-valid-after-all-and-how-to-admit-it-without-losing-face, to visions of a day when all Christians can share one cup at one table. In popular usage we now talk about "ecumaniacs," a breed to be defined as "those who love every branch of Christendom except their own."

The root word itself, *oikoumene*, was originally innocent of these or any other theological overtones. It was simply the Greek word for "the inhabited world." It is used fifteen times in the New Testament.

"Go ye into all the *oikoumene* and preach the gospel to every creature," the disciples are told. And we learn, earlier on, that a decree had gone out from Caesar Augustus that all the *oikoumene* should be taxed.

The word was picked up in the early church to describe the Christian community wherever it was in the inhabited world. An ecumenical council was a council in which the whole church was present. Creeds that were universally accepted throughout the inhabited world were called "ecumenical creeds," a term used by the Reformers, for example, in The Formula of Concord, to refer to the Apostles', Nicene and Athanasian Creeds.

After centuries of neglect, the word has come back into widespread usage only in the present century. As the Oxford Conference on Life and Work put it in 1937, "[The Churches] are ecumenical insofar as they attempt to realize the *Una Sancta*, the fellowship of Christians who acknowledge one Lord." This has become the most widely accepted Protestant usage of the term: ecumenical concern is a concern among divided Christians for unity. This has also come to characterize the more recent Roman Catholic rehabilitation of the term. As *De Oecumenismo* puts it, "The term 'ecumenical movement' indicates the initiatives and activities planned and undertaken, according to the various needs of the Church and as opportunities offer, to promote Christian Unity" (Ch. I, para. 4).

But there is a second meaning that must not be lost. In Protestant history, ecumenical activity is not only concern for the *unity* of the church, but also concern for its worldwide *mission*. Indeed, it was out of the Protestant missionary activity of the nineteenth century that concern for unity began to be focused, as the missionary societies realized what a scandal it was for them to be exporting western sectarian versions of the gospel. As the Central Committee of the World Council said in 1951, "This word [ecumenical] . . . is properly used to describe everything that relates to the whole task of the whole church to bring the gospel to the whole world. It therefore covers equally the missionary movements and the movement toward unity." The indissolubility of the themes of mission (the church going forth into the *oikoumene*) and unity (the church throughout the *oikoumene* overcoming its dividedness) received sym-

bolic expression in 1961 when the International Missionary Council (concerned with mission) and the World Council of Churches (concerned with unity) merged into one group at New Delhi.

Why this new and contemporary concern for unity and for mission? The answer is, of course, not that these are modern notions just recently discovered by Christians, but that they are the oldest and most basic concerns of Christian faith, solidly grounded in the New Testament itself. The command to go forth into all the *oikoumene* is a command that presupposes the unity of those going forth: "There is one body and one Spirit; just as you were called to the one hope of your calling, one Lord, one faith, one baptism" (Eph. 4:4-5). Again, "You are all one in Christ Jesus" (Gal. 3:28). And, most fundamentally, in Jesus' high-priestly prayer, "I do not pray for these only, but also for those who are to believe in me through their word, that they all may be one . . ." (John 17:20).

Ecumenism, then, is simply a contemporary attempt to take with fresh seriousness the imperative of the Lord of the church that all his flock are to be one. And the ecumenical problem is that today we are *not* fully one. The statement made in 1952 at the Wiltingen Conference of the International Missionary Council is one most Christians would now affirm: "We can no longer be content to accept our divisions as normal."

THREE PROBLEMS IN CURRENT ECUMENISM

Let us assume all that. Let us assume that we have come to the place where we recognize the scandal and sin of our divisions, and that we are concerned to do something about them. Instead of patting ourselves on the back for our newly-found ecumenical awareness, let us ask what problems we face in moving from where we now are to where we know, in the light of the gospel, we ought to be. I am going to suggest three such problems, the first growing out of Protestant assessments of Roman Catholic ecumenism, and the other two being examples of intramural Protestant problems.

1. The first of these I will put bluntly, and without ecumenical *politesse*, simply to save time: there is a lurking fear in some Protestant quarters that the recently-developed Roman Catholic ecumenical concern is a kind of trick, a "soft-sell" technique designed

simply to get Protestants to return to the Catholic fold with less pain. Indeed, the question must be soberly faced: *can* Catholicism ever really mean by ecumenism anything other than conversion to the Catholic Church? When all the new cordiality has been expended, when all the newer words have been spoken ("separated brethren" instead of "schismatics and heretics"), when all the joint prayers have been offered, is not the Catholic ecumenical gesture still the beckoning invitation, "Come home"? And we all know where home is: home is Rome. Can it honestly be otherwise, as long as the Roman Catholic believes that his is the *only true church* of Jesus Christ? Does not the Catholic face the rest of Christendom with, in Mark Twain's words, "the calm confidence of a Christian with four aces"?

So goes the query. It is an honest, if a disturbing, query, and we have reached the stage in ecumenical relationships where it can be honestly and disturbingly asked. For some Catholics, it occasions no problem whatsoever. It simply describes what is in fact the situation, and ecumenical honesty requires that it be so stated. Cardinal Heenan, for example, in certain of his ecumenical utterances, makes this point without apology and without rancor.

But to the Protestant, this kind of attitude on the part of a Catholic sometimes seems to make ecumenism a *cul-de-sac*. He was not attracted in the ecumenical dark ages (i.e., before 1959) by the invitation to repent and return. He was willing, perhaps, to repent, but he wanted to repent in company, and he did not find the posture of *ecclesiastical* repentance one that his Catholic brother seemed ready to adopt. He did not like the idea that all the fault was to be assigned to one side of the division and all the virtue to the other.

A good deal of wind has been taken out of such Protestant sails, it must be admitted, by the *De Oecumenismo* decree. Therein it is acknowledged that all of us must repent, the Catholic Church included, and ask forgiveness of each other and of God. Therein it is also acknowledged that fault does lie on both sides. But, those concessions made, the Protestant still wonders if the fundamental mood has changed.

My own response to the question is a rather complex one. (After

all, what theologian ever has a simple response to any question?) I do think that the fundamental mood is a different one today. It is not only that the imagery of "return" has been abandoned, but that the mindset that produced it is not the regnant mindset in many parts of Catholicism today. This does not mean for a moment, of course, that Catholics have abandoned their belief that theirs is the one true church. But they have acknowledged that the one true church is *reformable*, and indeed that it stands in need of constant reformation. For such Catholics, the posture is no longer one of a static church, waiting passively for the penitent Protestants to crawl to its shelter. The new imagery now is more that of each group moving out toward the other, moving as far as each can do without sacrificing its integrity, but nevertheless moving out at certain risk, the risk of realizing that an encounter is going to take place, and that in an encounter into which two partners genuinely enter, neither partner emerges from the encounter precisely as he was beforehand. This means that in the course of the ecumenical encounter, the Catholic Church will be changed as well as the Protestant churches—and if the juxtaposition of the words "church" and "change" is still too harsh for certain Catholic ears, I am quite willing to abide by contemporary Catholic ecumenical lexicography, and refer to "development" instead of "change." In the ecumenical encounter, then, the Catholic Church will develop toward newer understandings, deeper appropriations, of those truths she already holds. Thus the Catholic, as he looks to what his church will be fifty years from now, need not believe he will find there an exact replica of his church today. It will have engaged in inner reform and it will even have gained certain things from the best of Protestantism, just as Protestantism in its turn will have gained from the best of Catholicism.

To the degree that this approach can be entertained by the Catholic, I think we have an ecumenical future. If it cannot be entertained, if the final word uttered by the Catholic must always be "surrender," then ecumenism may make life more tolerable for us all, but it will not lead to full unity—save as the word "surrender" is a word we *both* utter, meaning by it not "surrender to my notion of the church," but rather, "Let both of us surrender our pride,

both individual and ecclesiastical, to Jesus Christ, and allow him to do with our penitence and contrition whatever he will."

2. From that attempt to set forth an area of ecumenical tension between Catholic and Protestant, let me turn to a second area, this time one that focuses on intramural Protestant concerns once ecumenism enters our thinking.

The question can be put this way, and many Protestants do put it this way: as certain Protestant groups move outward to enter into dialogue with the Roman Catholic Church, do they not thereby jeopardize their relationship to other Protestant groups? To put it concretely, as Presbyterians engage in ecumenical dialogue with Catholics, do they not thereby render dialogue with Southern Baptists (or other left-wing groups in Protestantism) more difficult? The potential divisiveness can be effected toward the theological right as well as the ecclesiastical left. For historically those Protestant groups that have been theologically most conservative have tended to be those that are most "anti-Roman," that see the anti-Christ lurking behind every pillar in St. Peter's, let alone in Peter's chair.

But the problem exists on all levels. It is increasingly evident in Britain, for example, that the Church of England focuses its sights on Rome rather than Geneva—a rather delicate and precise optical problem when you are taking your sights from Canterbury—and that it will not engage in ecumenical activity with Methodists, say, if such activity might jeopardize future ecumenical activity with cardinals.

So some Protestants find themselves alienated from their fellow Protestants because the latter, they feel, are engaging in ecumenical dialogue in terms that are oriented almost exclusively toward Roman Catholic problems. It is hard for a church that does not have bishops to see the ecumenical significance of a new way of relating the authority of the bishop of Rome to the other bishops; it is hard for churches with a rather exclusive Christo-centrism to understand why Mary should be such a central topic of ecumenical conversation; it is hard for those groups who believe in the free activity of the Holy Spirit to see why the hierarchy should be understood as the primary and normal vehicle of the Spirit's activity. In other words, as ecumenically-minded Protestants come closer to a kind of theo-

logical understanding with Roman Catholics, they may end up further away from certain of their fellow Protestants than they were at the beginning, with the net result that the ecumenical dialogue may not thereby have succeeded in healing any of the breaches in Christendom; it may only have succeeded in changing the location of the breaches.

To this internal Protestant dilemma, then, I would comment in the following way: we are past the time when ecumenical concern can be located within only a segment of Christendom. For a while, indeed, we may have to be like the proverbial horseman who mounted his steed and rode off in all directions, for we cannot be concerned only with those of our own denominational family, or with Protestants in the "main stream" (which is always defined as where *I* happen to be), or only with Orthodox, or only with Roman Catholics. We are in a period in which the map of Christendom is going to be redrawn, and none of the present borders are inviolable. This may result in a few rather insecure decades during which a new understanding within one portion of Christendom may seem to create fresh misunderstandings elsewhere. But this is the inevitable price of growth and change. It will be hard for Protestants, for example, to entertain the notion that they have slighted the place of Mary in the economy of salvation; but it will be just as hard for Catholics to realize that they have now embarked on a necessary attempt to restore Mary to a right relationship with her Son in the economy of salvation.

The principle to guide us during this period when ecumenical activity may seem disruptive of other relationships we have enjoyed in the past, is this: everything that draws formerly divided groups of Christians into new relationships with each other is ecumenically important, and works finally to the greater glory of God. The other side of the same coin is that every attempt of a given tradition in Christendom be faithful to its own best insights and submit them to fresh scrutiny in the light of the gospel—every such attempt will finally draw us closer together.

3. There is a third problem arising out of the new ecumenical situation, one that I will call the problem of *structure*. If we are committed to visible unity, as we surely are, what will be the marks

of that unity? What kinds of structures are necessarily a part of what makes the church the church? Here the Roman Catholic can give a fairly confident answer: the church will have an episcopate, a clearly assented-to body of doctrine, a group of parishes all of whom acknowledge the bishop of Rome as the vicar of Christ, and so forth.

But the Protestant answer to the question of structure is not so clear. Some churches have episcopacy while others do not. Some have clearly defined creeds and confessions while others do not. None of them defines the bishop of Rome as the vicar of Christ. The Protestant heritage has sometimes suffered from a false understanding of the distinction between the visible and the invisible church. I personally find the distinction less and less useful. Indeed, as the Westminster Confession of Faith says, "This Catholic Church hath been sometimes more, sometimes less, visible." I would prefer to speak directly of the visible church, and then deal with the relationship within it of holiness and sin. I think, however, that most Protestants would now be agreed that structure, visible structure, is necessary to the church. This means that our intramural Protestant problem is to see how best we can articulate those dimensions of structure that we believe to be necessarily, and not just accidentally, part of what makes the church the church.

Instead of trying to cover the waterfront here, let me use as illustrative the most burning problem in the area of structure: episcopacy. I come from a tradition that has not had episcopacy—at least in name—and yet I am prepared to accept as axiomatic that any reunited Christendom, even any reunited Protestantism, will have episcopacy as a part of its visible structure. I am not alone in this. The three non-episcopal groups that went into the Church of South India with the Anglicans accepted episcopacy. The proposals for the North India, Pakistan and Ceylon mergers do the same. And in the recent meetings of the Consultation of Church Union (attempting to implement the so-called "Blake Proposal"), all six participating denominations accepted episcopacy as constitutive of the specific plan of reunion to which they pledged themselves.

The realistic question to be faced is thus not "Will a fully reunited church have bishops?" for the only possible answer is an

affirmative one. The realistic question is rather, "What does episcopacy mean?" It is important to note that the Episcopalians themselves are not of one mind on the question. For some of them episcopacy is of the very *esse* of the church, so that without it there could be no church at all. For others, episcopacy is of the *plene esse*, the fullness of the church, so that without it there could be a church, but it would be a defective church. For the rest, episcopacy is of the *bene esse*, the well-being of the church, and constitutes a helpful and important way of demonstrating the historic continuity of the church with its past, of indicating where the church's teaching authority lies, and so forth. Such an interpretation as the latter would not pose insuperable problems for most Protestants, and most of them already have something very close to "bishops" in this sense in their present structures, even though the term may not be used. In other words, if Episcopal participants in the Consultation on Church Union can allow to other denominations the same diversity of interpretation of episcopacy that they presently accord their own ordinands, the barriers are not insuperable.

The objection to this mode of procedure is clear: this is reunion by compromise, this is fuzzing the central issue rather than facing it. The whole approach would, I am sure, seem hopelessly minimal to the Roman Catholic, for not even the highest Anglican in Christendom has an ordination that can presently be accepted as valid in Roman Catholic eyes. But it seems to me that the next step for non-Roman Catholics in this matter of structure (using episcopacy now as illustrative) involves our *growing together* in the meaning that episcopacy can come to have for us. Where this will lead us we cannot be sure, but we will never be led anywhere as long as we are too timid to embrace an understanding of episcopacy that does not involve a sheer repudiation of our past.

If this seems to the Catholic a curious notion of episcopacy—one that grows in meaning rather than being definitively understood at the start—I would only suggest that something at least faintly analogous (in a different context to be sure) is now proceeding within Roman Catholicism itself. Surely the third chapter of the constitution *De Ecclesia* means that episcopacy is now understood in Roman Catholicism in at least a slightly different way than it

was before. And any cautionary *Nota Explicativa Praevia* to the contrary notwithstanding, the introduction of collegiality means that the Catholic Church too is growing in its understanding of episcopacy, the full fruits of which have not been unfolded even yet to Roman eyes.

The other analogy that suggests itself is the deliberately equivocal use in *De Oecumenismo* of the term "churches and ecclesial communities" to describe the corporate religious life of the separated brethren. It is not made clear just which groups deserve the title "churches," nor which are only "ecclesial communities," nor indeed which may be no more than "communities." It is expected that the fullness of these terms will be worked out in the new ecumenical situation, and that a term like "church" can be used now in a way it was not used by Roman Catholics even a few years ago in describing non-Roman Catholic communal life. This procedure seems to me not too dissimilar from what is happening to the term "episcopacy" in Protestant merger negotiations.

CONCLUDING COMMENTS

Let me conclude with two broad comments that really amount to little more than a kind of Protestant *nihil obstat* to Father O'Hanlon's earlier remarks.

First, our ecumenical task is not to create unity but to make more manifest the unity we already have. This has been the approach of those groups working within the World Council of Churches. They do not say, "We are separated, let us come together." They say, "We are already one in Christ, so let us remove the barriers that disfigure and hide the unity we already have." And on the basis of *De Ecclesia*, it is now possible for the Catholic-Protestant ecumenical discussion to proceed in analogous fashion. By baptism, *De Ecclesia* insists, we are all incorporated into the one church of Jesus Christ, however defective the incorporation some of us have may seem to certain others of us. Historically, this unity in Christ has been disfigured by divisions, but what we now face is fundamentally a family disagreement; we are still brothers even if we don't act like brothers all the time—or maybe because we act

like brothers far too much of the time. So our task is to make visible the unity that we, in our human sin, have distorted but not fully lost.

Finally, I would agree with Father O'Hanlon that there are many levels of unity. The ultimate goal is full organic unity. That will not come soon, and many fail to see how it can come at all. But short of that (which is always our Lord's will for us), there are increasingly significant levels of sharing in which we can engage. Short of organic unity, there is still much we can do together in speech, in liturgy, and in joint endeavor for the civic good—common dialogue, common worship, common action. The fact that organic union is not around the corner should not discourage us from pursuing what *is* around the corner and within reach. For we have no way of knowing just what the view from around the corner will be like. We can be sure only that the perspective there will be different, and that we too will be different, for having made the venture of trying to get there. So there is nothing depressing about the fact that we can only make the next step. It is, on the contrary, exhilarating, because we do not know precisely what will be the nature of the step after the next one. That is known only to God, and it is the task of our generation to walk in faith that he will direct the next step, and the next one, and the next after that, in order that he may draw us closer to him, and therefore, inevitably and wonderfully, closer to each other.

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