

## THEOLOGY OF ECUMENISM

In my lighter moments I tell my friends that all this complicated discussion about theological differences between Catholics and Protestants is really quite beside the point. The really essential difference between them is that Catholics pray fast and sing slow, while Protestants sing fast and pray slow. All other differences are trivial.

However, since the program this evening is under the auspices of the Catholic *Theological Society*, I suppose it is only proper that we talk about the theology of ecumenism. But please don't expect a fully developed theology. You might as well know from the start that such a theology simply does not yet exist. The best we can do is hope that our discussion this evening will give us a little more understanding of the movement toward Christian unity. For that is the work of the theologian, to understand Christian realities. A theology of ecumenism, then, will grow out of reflection on the fact of Christian division and the movement toward the unity of his followers for which Christ prayed.

Our reflections fall quite naturally into two parts: (1) the disease; (2) the cure. The disease has two principal symptoms, of which the first and most alarming is that, for most Christians, both Catholic and Protestant, the separation of their churches causes little or no pain. Why? Because, as the Lutheran theologian George Lindbeck said last week at a workshop on Christian unity in Boston, they have grown up with the idea that the churches are there to provide them with individual spiritual benefits. Each looks on his church as a kind of spiritual supermarket to which he comes at regular intervals to stock up on supplies. Since neither Catholic nor Protestant, for the most part, has caught the vision of what Christ's Church really *is*: an open community of love intended by the Father to be a focus of reconciliation and unity for the whole human family, he does not long for Christian unity. After all, if the point of belonging to a church and going to church, even celebrating the Eucharist, is simply to find personal solace and increase one's spiritual bank account, or, to change the metaphor slightly, to keep up the payments on one's

spiritual fire insurance, there is no reason in the world to be concerned about the division of the churches. If these wants seem to be adequately supplied in the "church of your choice," as the billboards put it, what difference does it make if there are other Christian churches quite separated from ours? It may even provide healthy competition. If being a Christian means no more than an individual relationship to God, why worry about the disunity of Christians among themselves?

If I move on quickly beyond this symptom, common to both Catholic and Protestant, to one which is more special to Catholics, it is not because this failure to understand the social and communal nature of the Church is less important. It is of *basic* importance. But in our own exchange this evening, it is more proper for me to look particularly at the responsibility we Catholics bear for Christian disunity. Most of our failures grow out of what I call the "either-or" or "all-or-nothing" mentality. Catholics who begin to think about Christian unity often end up in frustration because they oversimplify. They presume that Christian unity is either totally present or totally absent, that there are no in-betweens. One consequence of this way of thinking (or perhaps it is really a cause, since in these matters symptoms and causes are hard to distinguish) is that Catholics tend to say "is" about their Church when honesty would make them say "ought." They speak of the unity which exists in the Catholic Church as though it were the full and perfect unity the Church will have only in the New Jerusalem. At times such Catholics give the impression that Christian unity means one thing only: communion with the Bishop of Rome. Those who are held together by this bond of unity are fully one, while those not bound together by this bond are not at all one in Christ. This attitude exaggerates the kind of unity which Catholics have among themselves and goes a long way, I am convinced, to explain the unrepentant narrowness which other Christians have often criticized in us. This attitude confuses the full and perfect unity of the Kingdom which will be given to us when Christ comes again in glory with the imperfect unity of the pilgrim Church. At this moment in salvation history, it is a mistake to say without qualification that the Catholic Church *is* one and *is* universal. We must realize that *full* unity is an ideal to-

ward which we move, indeed, from which we at times move away. It is quite true that from the day of Pentecost, which inaugurated the present and final stage of salvation history, all the forces necessary for achieving this unity were implanted in the Church. The very life of Father, Son and Holy Spirit become the inner rhythm of the life of God's holy people. But we have not been conscious enough that the Church exists caught in the tension between the "already" and the "not yet," between the "is" and the "ought to be." The Catholic Church is not yet the bride without spot and wrinkle of the heavenly marriage feast. This either-or mistake about Christian unity not only leads Catholics to confuse what the Church ought to be with what she now is, thus tempting them to an arrogant presumption of perfect unity. It also blinds them to the real bonds of unity which they already share with other Christians, with the result that they fail to manifest this existing unity to the world. What we are now beginning to realize better is that even after the tragic divisions between East and West, and the more recent divisions in the West, although the people of God on march through the centuries no longer marched together in full unity, many of the bonds of unity remained. For those who agree with Cardinal Heenan that being a Christian is far more important than the added quality of being a Catholic, it is clear that the bonds of unity which remained are even more significant than the bond of communion with Rome, important as that may be in itself. In the East, practically every other bond of unity remained. In the West, after the Protestant Reformation, the preaching of the Gospel out of the divinely inspired Scriptures remained, as did baptism and a sincere faith in Christ as Lord and God, and as the only mediator between God and man, for the glory of the one God, the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit. The interior life of grace remained, along with hope and charity and the other interior gifts of the Holy Spirit. The fruit of these gifts continued to manifest itself in praise and thanksgiving for the benefits received from the Father through Christ, as well as in a lively sense of justice and true charity towards others. At times the love of the same Christ in whom we live led other Christians even to the supreme sacrifice of shedding their blood for Him. Across our divisions, we have been still linked in some way through their corporate acts of worship

which truly engender a life of grace and in some way link these brothers of ours to the community of salvation.

Let us not be carried away with false enthusiasm. We know that not all of these bonds of unity exist in all other Christian churches, and that there are many ambiguities in the way they are understood, but let us honestly acknowledge at the same time that among us who are in full communion with the successor of St. Peter, it is wrong to speak of unity in an unqualified either-or sense. I am convinced that one of the principal barriers we will have to overcome if we are to move forward in our work for Christian unity is the mistaken notion that unity either exists or does not exist, and that there are no in-betweens. If tomorrow all the Christian churches were to accept the primacy and infallibility of the Bishop of Rome, and all else remained unchanged, would we have achieved the unity we seek? Certainly not! Even now, within the community of those who fully accept the authority of Rome, who would boast that many bonds of Christian unity do not need to be strengthened in many ways?

Let us rejoice that many real and profound bonds of Christian unity already exist between ourselves and other Christian churches. And let us not hesitate to give this unity visible form, in prayer and worship, first of all, and then in joint witness and service in the world. Let us take to heart the challenging words of the Lund Conference on Faith and Order in 1952, spoken to their own Protestant and Orthodox members, but no less applicable now in 1965 to us Catholics as well: "Should not our Churches ask themselves whether they are showing sufficient eagerness to enter into conversation with other Churches, and whether they should not act together in all matters except those in which deep differences of conviction compel them to act separately?" Too frequently we act on precisely the opposite principle: "Let us act separately in all matters except in those where circumstances compel us to act together."

This diagnosis of the disease of disunity among Christians could be continued at greater length, but if we are to leave time for discussion we must move on to say a word about the cure.

The cure must begin, as the decree on ecumenism insists, with a *conversio cordis*, a change of heart. In a spirit of humility and repentance we must confess our sins against unity and be converted.

Our first conversion must be to an awareness that unity is not an extra. It is of the essence of the Church. To the degree that we disregard or weaken or destroy unity, we disregard and weaken and destroy the Church herself. Unity is as essential to the Church as coldness to ice or four sides to a square. If we are to break out of our closed selves and if our Christian communities are to break out of their narrow isolation, we must open our eyes and see that this demand is put on us by the very nature of the Christian church. This applies to us all, Protestant and Catholic alike.

Secondly, we, as Catholics, must be converted from a false triumphalism. We must see the need of reform and renewal in ourselves and in the Catholic Church, which remains, as she goes her pilgrim way, a church of sinners, summoned by Christ to that continual reformation of which she always has need, as the decree on ecumenism reminds us.

We Catholics must set about the work of renewal, stimulated and helped by increased exchange and sharing with other Christian churches in every way possible. We Catholics freely and gratefully acknowledge that the example of the Protestant Churches has much to do with our return to the Bible, to more meaningful worship, to appreciation of the priesthood of all believers. And our task has only begun.

The word "return," as it has been used by individual Catholics and in some of the earlier official documents of the Church, has, as we know, been very offensive to our Protestant and Orthodox brethren. The decree on ecumenism, wisely does not speak of "return" but rather of the "restoration of unity." However, many Protestant theologians have asked whether this might be nothing more than polite language to cover the same reality as before. Some of the observers at the Council, particularly, I think, the Protestants from Northern Continental Europe, found in the Council documents a view of the worldwide Christian community as a set of concentric circles, with the Roman Catholic Church in the center, and other churches at various distances from it. This seemed to them to be the old Roman arrogance in new form, another way of suggesting that the naughty children return to mother.

I want to suggest that, if we put together two important ideas, we

might find a way to take a step forward toward an honest solution of this problem. The first idea is one that I have already dwelt on at length, the recognition that Christian unity is built of many bonds, and each of these bonds can be stronger or weaker. The second idea is that "return" is demanded of *all* the Christian churches, but in different ways. Before I bring these two ideas together, let me explain what I mean by saying that "return" is demanded of all the Christian churches. The decree on ecumenism does not use the word "return" (*reditus*) but it does use equivalents. It speaks of change of heart, of conversion, of renewal, of reform. Since it is to Catholics that the decree is addressed, it is demanding all this of Catholics and of the Catholic Church. Now if we look at the writings of the Old Testament prophets, we find that the Hebrew verb *shub*, whose literal meaning is "turn" or "return," is the word used to express all these ideas. All conversion, all repentance, is a return to some demand of God which has been neglected.

Now let us take these two ideas, unity as made of many elements, and "return" or "conversion" which is demanded of all of us. Some of the elements of unity to which Catholics must return are a deeper appreciation and love of Sacred Scripture, a sense of the freedom of the sons of God, an appreciation of the presence of Christ in the midst of those gathered together in his name, and much else. In all of this they are beginning to accept the implicit invitation which Protestants issue to them. Not least of all, Catholics must return to a notion of authority which is more faithful to the Gospel. They must return, as the Council documents suggest, to a notion of authority in the Church which is service, not domination, to an authority which does not crush or stifle responsible freedom on lower levels but supports and develops it.

What Catholic would dare to say, for instance, that if one were to draw concentric circles illustrating the degree to which Christians are made one in Christ by appreciation of His presence in the community assembled to hear His word, the Roman Catholic Church would be in the center of *that* set of concentric circles? That is one of the sets of concentric circles to whose center she must return.

But just as we Catholics are stimulated and implicitly invited in our dialogue with Protestants to return to a deepening of many of the

bonds of unity we have neglected, I think we must recognize in all honesty that we implicitly invite Protestants and Orthodox to return in some way to that visible center of unity which is the Bishop of Rome.

One final remark: here we Catholics find ourselves in an embarrassing and psychologically difficult position. I think it is much easier to ask one's brother in Christ to return to a greater love of the Bible, and a more personal faith, than it is to invite him to return to a visible center of unity which happens to exist in one's own Church. Such an invitation can easily look much more like an invitation simply to submit to *our* organization than an invitation to be faithful to the Gospel. We must, then, expect the other Christian churches to reflect on this kind of return only as a return to something which Christ Himself demands. Let me say here quite frankly that I think Protestants (with some noticeable exceptions like Cullmann, for instance) especially in this country, seem to have devoted very little serious attention to the New Testament texts which deal with the position of Peter and his successors in the Church.

One final word: It remains *our* primary task, as Catholics, to return to all the Christian elements we have neglected. It remains our task to make the Catholic Church a community of Christian freedom where authority is purified of all those accretions which hide the Gospel.

That is *our* task of return. To the degree that we faithfully address ourselves to it, other Christians will find the kinds of return Christ asks of *them* less difficult.

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