

THE SPIRIT OF UNITY

By RUTH SLADE

THE CHRISTIAN COMMUNITY at Ephesus was instructed by Paul to be 'eager to maintain the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace';¹ or, as another translation has it, to 'do your best to preserve the unity which the Spirit gives in the peace which binds you together'.² Unity, then, belongs to the Spirit; it is the Spirit's gift to us; but there is nothing automatic about it, and we are called upon to preserve and maintain this unity which we have been given.

This unity of the Spirit, his gift to us, is the 'communion', the 'fellowship' which we have both with God and with one another. 'The grace of the Lord Jesus Christ and the love of God and the *fellowship of the holy Spirit* be with you all', writes St Paul.³ We might equally say, 'participation in the Spirit'.⁴ In the holy Spirit we are made 'partakers of the divine nature',⁵ through him 'our fellowship is with the Father and with his Son Jesus Christ'.⁶ This fellowship is true life. When roman catholics recite the Nicene Creed in the liturgy on Sundays and other major feast-days, they proclaim the holy Spirit as 'Lord and giver of life'. The Uppsala text on 'The Holy Spirit and the Catholicity of the Church' says: 'The Church gladly confesses the Holy Spirit as the Lord, and giver of life. This is the eternal life which God the Father shares with all those who are in fellowship with his Son'.⁷ And in this fellowship with the Father and his Son 'we have fellowship with one another', we are 'bound together in peace' with one another, through 'God's love which has been poured into our hearts through the holy Spirit which has been given to us'.⁸ We are to love one another as Jesus has loved us;⁹ and

¹ Eph 4, 3. *Revised Standard Version* (RSV).

² *Today's English Version* (TEV).

³ 2 Cor 13, 14.

⁴ Cf RSV note to this verse; also RSV translation of Phil 2, 1.

⁵ 2 Pet 1, 4.

⁶ 1 Jn 1, 3.

⁷ 1 Jn 1, 1-4. For a detailed study of this text, elaborated at the Fourth Assembly of the World Council of Churches held in Uppsala, Sweden, in July 1968 with the active participation and commitment of roman catholic delegated observers, see Lanne, Emmanuel, O.S.B., 'Unity and Catholicity: Uppsala 1968', in *One in Christ*, 1969, no 2. For the text itself, see *The Uppsala Report 1968*, (Geneva) pp 11-18.

⁸ 1 Jn 1, 7; Eph 4, 3; Rom 5, 5.

⁹ Jn 15, 12, 17.

this love springs from the love with which the Father loves the Son: 'as the Father has loved me, so have I loved you'.¹ It is this loving unity of Christ's disciples in the Father and the Son which is to be a sign to the world, so that the world may believe and come to know and share in the same divine and human fellowship.²

This unity, this fellowship of the Spirit is no external gift; it is brought about by the indwelling of the Spirit himself, sent by the Father in answer to the prayer of Jesus,³ the gift of the Spirit bringing Christ's presence to each and to all of those who believe in him.⁴ The Spirit comes to each; on the day of Pentecost the tongues of fire rested on each one of them.⁵ He is given to all together; Jesus 'breathed on them, and said to them, Receive the holy Spirit'.⁶ Each one is God's temple, with God's Spirit dwelling in him.⁷ All together are God's temple, for 'through Christ all of us, jews and gentiles, are able to come in the one Spirit into the presence of the Father . . . in union with him you (gentiles) too are being built together with all the others into a house where God lives through his Spirit'.⁸ The Spirit is given to each of us at our baptism, as he descended upon Jesus at his baptism;⁹ but also we are all baptized into one body by the one Spirit.¹⁰

The fruits of the indwelling of the Spirit contribute to the building up of the unity of all. They are summed up in these two: life and peace.¹¹ But St Paul also gives a longer list: 'love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, humility, self-control', and he adds: 'If we live by the Spirit let us also walk by the Spirit. Let us have no self-conceit, no provoking of one another, no envy of one another . . . Bear one another's burdens, and so fulfil the law of Christ'.¹²

There is a striking similarity between this list and the description of that spiritual ecumenism which the Decree on Ecumenism calls 'the soul of the whole ecumenical movement'.¹³ These are the various elements mentioned there as going to make up 'spiritual ecumenism',

¹ Jn 15, 9.

² Jn 17, 21, 23.

³ Jn 14, 16-17.

⁴ Eph 3, 17.

⁵ Acts 2, 3.

⁶ Jn 20, 22.

⁷ 1 Cor 3, 16.

⁸ Eph 2, 18, 22. (TEV).

⁹ The Fathers make great play with the imagery of the dove - St John Chrysostom writes that the holy Spirit descended as a dove on Jesus at his baptism, and he descends on each of the baptized. Why in the form of a dove? he asks, and replies that doves are gentle and pure, and the holy Spirit is the Spirit of gentleness and peace. St Cyprian, referring to the descent of the holy Spirit in the form of a dove, says that doves live in peace among themselves, and this is what should happen among christian brethren.

¹⁰ 1 Cor 12, 13.

¹¹ Rom 8, 6.

¹³ Gal 5, 22, 25-6; 6, 2.

¹² *Unitatis Redintegratio*, 7-8.

and for which we should pray to the holy Spirit: inner conversion and change of heart, self-denial, unstinted love, humility, gentleness, brotherly generosity, patience, penitence, holiness of life (union with the Father, the Word, and the Spirit), mutual brotherly love, as well as public and private prayer for the unity of christians.¹ In fact spiritual ecumenism is simply 'the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace' – a unity experienced already to some degree among separated christians and to be rediscovered and deepened and made visible in a fellowship which can be seen by all the world.² It is this 'unity of the Spirit' which is at the heart of all ecumenical dialogue and practical collaboration between christians. Any progress which we make towards greater institutional unity must be the expression of a deepening of our fellowship in the Spirit with the Father and his Son and with one another, or it will be more apparent than real.

The Decree includes 'public and private prayer for the unity of Christians' in its description of spiritual ecumenism, and it goes on to explain the kind of prayer intended: it is that prayer for the unity of the Church with which the Saviour himself on the eve of his death of fervently appealed to his Father: 'That they may all be one'.³ We are to unite ourselves with Christ's own prayer to his Father for the unity of his disciples; we are to allow his prayer to be prayed in us.

There are two aspects to this prayer, which have been drawn out very well by Professor Boris Bobrinskoy.⁴ Before Jesus prayed for unity he had prayed to his Father for the coming of the Paraclete, another Comforter, to be with his disciples, to bring to their remem-

¹ The outstanding omission here is 'joy' – perhaps because this passage in the decree leans heavily on the tradition of 'spiritual ecumenism' which stems from the work of Abbé Paul Couturier of Lyons. As one of the pioneers of ecumenism, he stressed penitent suffering in face of christians divisions (as well as prayer and love, humility and growth in holiness), rather than joy and thanksgiving. Cf Michalon, Pierre, P.S.S., 'The Abbé Couturier and his continuing influence', in *One in Christ*, 1965, no 1, p 15.

The Uppsala text already quoted strikes the note of joyous thanksgiving in its opening sentences: 'We give thanks to God the Holy Spirit that at this very time he is leading us into a fresh and exhilarating understanding of the Body of Christ, to the glory of God the Father. He is transforming the relationships between separated Christian communities, so that we now speak to each other with greater mutual trust and with more hope of reconciliation than ever before. We may recall many recent events which fill us with deep gratitude . . .'

² The Decree on Ecumenism states that genuine concern for unity 'itself reveals already to some extent the bond of brotherhood between all christians and it helps towards that full and perfect unity which God in his kindness wills' (*Unitatis Redintegratio*, 5).

³ Jn 17, 21.

⁴ Cf 'The Theological Basis of Common Prayer for Unity', in *One in Christ*, 1967, no 3, pp 274–90, (in particular pp 288–90).

brance everything that Jesus had said to them, to lead them into all truth.¹ The 'priestly prayer' of John 17 is to be seen in the context of this prayer for, and promise of, the coming of the Paraclete. The sending of the holy Spirit can be seen as an answer to Jesus' prayer for unity as well as to his prayer for the Paraclete, for the Spirit brings with him unity and mutual love. Prayer for unity today is thus prayer for the outpouring of the Spirit anew. It is not surprising that the first octave of prayer for unity, announced by Pope Leo XIII in 1895, should have been placed between Ascension and Pentecost, nor that the infant Faith and Order Movement, in calling for a week of prayer for unity in 1920, should have chosen the week before Pentecost. If the January Week of Prayer came to take precedence (at least in some parts of the world), thanks to the work of Abbé Paul Couturier, this does not mean that Abbé Couturier – 'the holy Spirit's chosen theologian', as Professor Bobrinsky has called him² – neglected this aspect of prayer to and for the Spirit. Indeed, it is his vision of universal and unified prayer to the holy Spirit for the sanctification of all christian groups, so that, as the divided christians enter more deeply into the mystery of unity which is the life of the Trinity, they will finally meet together in that one Truth and that one Love which has done so much to inspire and deepen the prayer for unity of christians of all places and communions.

But also it is Christ's own prayer to his Father, 'that they may be one, as we are one', which is to be prayed in us. 'It is the same prayer which rises from the hearts of christians divided among themselves, that very prayer offered to the Father by their Christ before he went to his passion', wrote Abbé Couturier in 1937.³ But how can Christ's prayer to his Father be prayed in us? Only through his Spirit, the Spirit of Christ within us, the Spirit of sonship, who himself cries 'Abba, Father', in us; 'we do not know how to pray as we ought, but the Spirit himself intercedes for us with sighs too deep for words' – just as Christ intercedes for us at the right hand of God, continuing his priestly prayer.⁴ 'The more we implore God to strip us of ourselves the more we enter into the divine surrender – he that loses his life shall save it – and the more able we become to hear Christ praying in us to his Father by his Spirit'.⁵

¹ Jn 14, 16–17, 26; 16, 13.

² *Art. cit.*, p 275.

³ Michalon, *art. cit.*, p 10.

⁴ I Jn 3, 24; Gal 4, 6; Rom 8, 15–16, 26, 34; Heb 7, 25.

⁵ 'Prayer and Christian Unity: the Ecumenical Testament of Abbé Paul Couturier', in *One in Christ*, 1966, no 3, pp 222–3.

The Church: the Communion of the Spirit

It is the unity, the fellowship of the Spirit which is at the heart of the life of the Church – this unity of the Spirit which is not a juridical unity but a fellowship of life and peace, of love and faith and joy. Juridical unity is simply an expression of this far deeper unity which brings us into fellowship with the Father and his Son and with one another. Of course it is a necessary expression – as the Word was made flesh, so must unity in Christ through the Spirit be made visible, for we live in a world of men and institutions, and this deeper unity must become incarnate at the institutional level and be *seen*, if the world is to believe. Fellowship in the Spirit involves a visible, ecclesial unity: unity in one Church.

St Augustine struggled to express this relationship of spiritual and visible unity, to relate his teaching on the holy Spirit as the soul of the Church to what happens when there is a break in visible unity:

The bond of unity of the Church of God . . . is – no doubt with the co-operation of the Father and the Son – the work proper to the holy Spirit; for the holy Spirit is himself as it were the bond of the Father and the Son. The Father, indeed, is not regarded as Father both by the Son and by the holy Spirit, because he is not the Father of both. And the Son is not regarded as Son both by the Father and by the holy Spirit, because he is not the Son of both. But the holy Spirit is regarded as such both by the Father and by the Son, because he is the one Spirit of both.

What the soul is to the body of men, the holy Spirit is to the body of Christ, the Church; his work in the whole Church is the work of the soul in all the members of a single body. But . . . in a human body . . . a member can be cut off – a hand, a finger, a foot . . . When it was in the body, it was alive. Cut off, it loses its life. Similarly a christian is catholic when he lives in the body (of the Church). Cut off, he becomes a heretic: the Spirit does not follow the amputated member.

If you want to live in the holy Spirit, preserve charity, love truth, desire unity, to attain eternal life.¹

‘The Spirit does not follow the amputated member’, wrote Augustine quite logically. But what if this statement seems to contra-

¹ From *Sermons* 71 and 267, cited in *Les plus beaux textes sur le Saint-Esprit*, ed. Arsène-Henry (Paris, 1968), pp 191–2.

dict the facts of christian experience? What if there is evidence of the fruits of the Spirit in the apparently amputated member? The presence of the Spirit is recognizable by its fruit, and however surprising it may seem, theological reasoning simply has to take account of the fact: this happened, indeed, very early in the life of the Church, when the gift of the holy Spirit to the gentiles convinced Peter that they should be baptized and received into the full fellowship of the believers.¹ So with the amputated member; if he shows evidence of the fruits of the Spirit, is this not a sign that the amputation is not complete? St Irenaeus wrote, 'Where the Church is, there is the Spirit of God' – but he added: 'and where the Spirit of God is, there is the Church'.² Has not the history of Catholic ecumenism in recent years been a history of the gradual development of an understanding that we have to take account of the fact of the life of the Spirit within the separated Churches and communities? – so that there is a sense in which we can say that division is *within* the Church, not simply *from* it. The Holy Office *Instruction* of 1949 acknowledged that the ecumenical movement as it was developing among non-roman catholic christians was the work of the holy Spirit; the full import of this revolutionary statement was not understood at the time.³

The Decree on Ecumenism makes the same point: 'among our separated brethren also there increases from day to day a movement, fostered by the grace of the holy Spirit, for the restoration of unity among all christians'.⁴ But it also acknowledged in a much fuller way the life of the Spirit within other Churches and communities:

Moreover some, even very many, of the most significant elements and endowments which together go to build up and give life to the Church itself, can exist⁵ outside the visible boundaries of the Catholic Church: the written Word of God; the life of grace; faith, hope and charity, with other interior gifts of the Holy Spirit, as well as visible elements.

It adds that

the separated Churches and communities . . . have been by no means deprived of significance and importance in the

¹ Acts 10, 47; 11, 17–18.

² Arsène-Henry, *op. cit.*, p 178.

³ For the text of this *Instruction*, cf Leeming, Bernard, S.J., *The Churches and the Church* (London, 1963), pp 282–7.

⁴ *Unitatis Redintegratio*, 1.

⁵ The dogmatic constitution on the Church says that elements of sanctification and truth *do* exist outside the visible boundaries of the Catholic Church (*Lumen Gentium*, 8; and cf 15).

mystery of salvation. For the Spirit of Christ has not refrained from using them as means of salvation which derive their efficacy from the very fulness of grace and truth entrusted to the Catholic Church.

Indeed, what the holy Spirit has achieved through them can contribute to our own building up in Christ and the Church:

Nor should we forget that anything wrought by the grace of the Holy Spirit in the hearts of our separated brethren can contribute to our own edification. Whatever is truly Christian is never contrary to what genuinely belongs to the faith; indeed, it can always bring a more perfect realization of the very mystery of Christ and the Church.¹

This joyous recognition of the life of the Spirit in other Churches and communities means that we can think of the reunion of all in a new way. We can see that communion in the Spirit is not entirely broken, that there is something of the Church wherever we recognize the presence of the Spirit. This communion is present and expressed in different ways and in different degrees in the various Churches and communities; but we have something to learn from the way in which each has preserved and developed its own spiritual gifts, which all come from the same Spirit and are intended for the good of all.² The Eastern Orthodox Churches have a strong grasp of the Spirit's presence in the sacramental life of the Church, of the communion of faith and love in the Spirit between the local Churches as between sisters, and of the union in faith and witness of the whole christian people in the holy Spirit, from which we have much to learn. Among the separated Churches and communities of the West there has been a widespread and deep love for, and familiarity with, the holy scriptures, 'the sword of the Spirit',³ which we have only in recent years begun to emulate, and 'the Sacred Word is a precious instrument in the mighty hand of God for attaining to that unity which the Saviour holds out to all men'.⁴ Similarly, baptism, by water and the Spirit,⁵ 'constitutes the sacramental bond of unity existing among all who through it are reborn'.⁶

So in spite of divisions there remains some communion in the

¹ *Unitatis Redintegratio*, 4.

² 1 Cor 12, 4-7.

³ Eph 6, 17.

⁴ *Unitatis Redintegratio*, 21.

⁵ Jn 3, 5.

⁶ *Unitatis Redintegratio*, 22. The problems attaching to achieving full communion in the Spirit through the celebration of the Eucharist is dealt with in Fr Hurley's article above.

Spirit; there are degrees of communion, of fellowship in the Spirit. Until this communion in the Spirit is fully restored, the Church cannot 'realize the fulness of catholicity proper to her in those of her sons who, though joined to her by baptism, are yet separated from full communion with her. Furthermore, the Church herself finds it more difficult to express in actual life her full catholicity in all its aspects'.¹

A restored understanding of the Church as the people of God on its pilgrim way, summoned to continual reformation,² pressing forward towards the fulness of communion – which can never be complete until the Parousia – with the Father and the Son in the holy Spirit,³ makes it possible to see christian reunion not as a 'return' to a past static situation, not as an integration of other Churches and communities into the roman catholic Church, but as a growth towards full communion on the part of all. The restoration of communion in the Spirit between the divided Churches and communities means for each of them a pressing forward towards a fuller communion in the total mystery of Christ, in whom they meet together through the impulsion of the holy Spirit. And this is true also for the catholic Church. Unity is the Spirit's gift, already received by the Church. But also the Spirit is continually building up the body of Christ in unity; there is a sense in which it is still ahead of us. The Church is called to progress in unity, opening itself continually to the life-giving power of the Spirit, so that its growth in unity, love and truth may be drawn to completion.

What the Spirit is saying to the Churches

The Spirit already given to us is the guarantee that we are called to this future fulness of communion.⁴ His work as teacher is three-fold: he recalls to us all that we know of Christ, he interprets this to us anew, making it relevant for every age, and so he leads us into the fulness of truth which is Christ's will for us.⁵ Thus both continuity and constant renewal are the signs of his work, and our recurring question must be: what is the Spirit saying to the Churches *now*?⁶ This constant dependence upon the leading of the Spirit, 'without prejudging his future inspirations',⁷ must be the mark of the ecumenical movement.

¹ *Ibid.*, 4.

² *Ibid.*, 6.

³ *Ibid.*, 2.

⁴ 2 Cor 1, 22; 5, 5.

⁵ Jn 14, 26; 16, 14-15, 13.

⁶ Apoc 2, 7, 11, 17, 29; 3, 6, 13, 22.

⁷ *Unitatis Redintegratio*, 24.

The Uppsala text already quoted formulates one of the more recent insights of the ecumenical movement, when it recognizes that 'The same Spirit who is bringing us together in the Church does, in fact, make us more aware of the needs of the world and of our solidarity with a creation which is groaning in travail together'.¹ The text begins by giving thanks for the way in which the holy Spirit is transforming the relationships between separated christian communities, for advances towards church unions, for the mutual contributions of eastern and western Churches, for the powerful signs of renewal within the roman catholic Church. It goes on to acknowledge that the same Spirit, who has over the years been drawing the divided christian communities together, is now sending them out into the world; that there they are learning to see not only 'conflicts between races and nations . . . the miseries of men' but also 'the activity of the life-giving Spirit of God. We have come to view this world of men as the place where God is already at work to make all things new, and where he summons us to work with him'. As our eyes have been opened to recognize the work of the Spirit in other christian Churches and communities, so we are coming together to recognize his life-giving presence in the world. Our task is to co-operate with him there, where he is already at work drawing men out of isolation into a fellowship which must finally be recognized as that fellowship with the Father and his Son into which men of all times and races and places are called.

The concluding sentences of this text on 'The Holy Spirit and the Catholicity of the Church' speaks for all christians today:

When we consider the vision of unity granted to this generation and the resources of God's bounty available for the enrichment of mankind, we become newly aware of the tragic character of the divisions that separate us, including the divisions among us at this Assembly. We confess how empty and deceptive our talk of catholicity may sound, and how far we lag behind the summons of the Spirit. With a single voice all members of the Assembly pray 'Come creator Spirit', knowing that any answer to this prayer should open our eyes to God's future, which is already breaking in upon us.²

¹ *The Uppsala Report*, p 12.

² *Ibid.*, p 18.