

ECUMENICAL PROSPECTS

By MICHAEL RAMSEY

THE SAINTLY bishop Thomas Ken put his anglican concern for unity in words which find an echo far and wide in christendom:

I believe, O thou God of love, that all the saints on earth, by profession, ought to communicate one with another in evangelical worship, in the same holy sacraments, in the same divine and apostolical faith; in all the offices of corporal and spiritual charity, in reciprocal delight in one another's salvation, and in tender sympathy as one and the same body. O God of peace, restore in thy good time this catholic communion that with one heart and mind we may praise and love thee.

Here is a challenging picture of what has come to be called ecumenism: sharing together in the same faith, in the same sacraments, in prayer and worship, in visible fellowship and in the inner call to holiness. In the journey towards this goal every single christian in the world can share.

Now bishop Ken's comprehensive description contains phrases which touch on some acutely divisive issues. Where and what is 'the divine and apostolical faith', and where and what is the 'one and the same body?' The mystical aspect of unity cannot be entirely separated from the dogmatic and the constitutional aspects. But one of the gains of recent years has been that the mystical aspect has had an immeasurably larger place than in the past; and for this christendom owes much to the influence of Pope John XXIII and to the Second Vatican Council.

Pope John's vision has caused christians far and wide to link the work of unity with the work of renewal. This means that in place of the question, 'how is it possible to unite our ecclesiastical structures?', which loomed so large in the earlier days of ecumenism, priority now belongs to the questions, 'how may our several christian churches or communions become more Christlike in their life and mission?', and 'how already may we share with our separated fellow christians in that which baptism has given to all of us?' The decrees of the Second Vatican Council illustrate this new trend. No words have helped ecumenism more than these:

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The Church recognizes that she is in many ways linked with those who, being baptized, are honoured with the name of christians though they do not profess the faith in its entirety or do not preserve unity of communion with the see of St Peter. For there are many who honour sacred scripture, taking it as a norm of belief and a pattern of life, and also show a true apostolic zeal. They lovingly believe in God the Father Almighty and in Christ the Son of God and Saviour. They are consecrated by baptism, in which they are united to Christ . . . Likewise we can say that in some real way they are joined with us in the holy Spirit, for to them he gives his gifts and graces whereby he is operative among them with his sanctifying power.¹

As an anglican I do not of course accept the basic ecclesiology of this passage. But the point is rather that our diverse ecclesiologies do not contradict this aspect of unity for which the word 'mystical' is scarcely adequate. And from the passage I have just quoted from *Lumen Gentium* it is a small step to these words from the Decree on Ecumenism:

Nor should we forget that anything wrought by the grace of the holy Spirit in the hearts of our separated brethren can be a help to our own edification. Whatever is truly christian is never contrary to what genuinely belongs to the faith: indeed it always brings a deeper realization of the mystery of Christ and the Church.²

I quote these passages not as wanting to dwell upon the new tendency for Rome to say more of the significance of christianity beyond Rome's own borders, but rather as wanting to apply the principle wherever it calls for application – and it does call for application, for instance, to us anglicans in our relation to communions which lack what we hold to be norms of catholicity. But for ecclesiology itself, what new understanding is seen here to be apparent? I think what is apparent, and salutary for all of us, is a new grasp of the *eschatological* aspect of the Church. The Church will one day become perfectly that which she already is. Possessing already truth, unity, holiness, she will one day manifest these as a mirror more pure and perfect than ever in the past. So we read in the Decree on Ecumenism:

Every renewal of the Church is essentially grounded in an increase of fidelity to her own calling. Undoubtedly this is the basis of the movement towards unity. Christ summons the Church to continual reformation as she goes on her pilgrim way. The Church is always in need of this, in so far as she is an institution of man here on earth.³

¹ *Lumen Gentium*, 15.

² *Unitatis redintegratio*, 4.

³ *Ibid.*, 5.

I find this line of thought strikingly developed by Fr Yves Congar in his work *Chrétiens en Dialogue*. Here he pictures the catholic Church moving through centuries of reform and purgation to become its own true self. In that process the separated bodies will have their role to play, becoming similarly purged themselves until 'they converge upon that point of plenitude to which the catholic Church may not yet have attained but which she knows to lie along her own trajectory alone'.⁴ We are reminded of St Augustine's distinction between *ecclesia qualis nunc est* and *ecclesia qualis tunc erit*. (The Church as she is now . . . and as she will be then.)

Eschatology is about the future. But it does not imply an attitude of 'don't bother, because it will all come right in the end'. Rather does it imply a future which presses urgently upon the present in grace and in judgement. True, the growth of any of us in holiness, truth and unity with other christians cannot be hurried, but because we are in Christ by holy baptism we dare not wilfully delay our response as people 'called to be saints with all that call upon the name of the Lord in every place'.⁵

The relations of the roman catholic Church and the Anglican Communion have moved miraculously in the last decade. The movement has been apparent both in theological dialogue and in practical relations. Both were called for in the 'Agreed Statement' signed by Pope Paul VI and the Archbishop of Canterbury in the Basilica of St Paul-without-the-Walls on 24 March, 1966. In practical relations, the statement gives thanks for 'a new atmosphere of christian fellowship between the Roman Catholic Church and the Churches of the Anglican Communion', and it calls upon the members of the two communions to treat one another 'with these same sentiments of respect, esteem and mutual love'. As to theological dialogue, it called for it to proceed on the basis of 'the gospels and the ancient common traditions' – a striking choice of words. The dialogue was to include 'not only theological matters such as scripture, tradition and liturgy, but also matters of practical difficulty, felt on either side'. This was in line with the words which the Pope had used in the Sistine Chapel on the previous day: 'charity can, and must from now on, be exercised between us and show forth its mysterious and prodigious strength'.

In practical relations, a new fraternity has been apparent almost

⁴ English translation, *Dialogue between Christians* (London, 1966).

⁵ 1 Cor 1,2.

everywhere in the world (the word 'almost' is made necessary by one or two countries where heartbreaking involvements of religion and politics tell another story.) Joining in prayer, in public worship, in evangelism, in theological study and teaching and in the social action is the order of the day. But the degree of progress sometimes depends on the way in which a roman catholic hierarchy interprets and acts upon the Vatican documents which are relevant. For instance, the *Directory concerning the applications of the decisions of the Second Council of the Vatican concerning ecumenical matters* allows 'occasionally' the *presence* of roman catholics at anglican or other non-roman catholic eucharistic liturgies. But what are the occasions? In some countries the hierarchy allows the occasions to be frequent, in other countries the hierarchy discourages them altogether. Similarly the most helpful *Motu Proprio* on mixed marriages is interpreted differently in different countries. The Anglican-Roman Catholic Commission on this subject moves rather slowly. There are some fields of ethics in which divergence is very apparent. While roman catholics are puzzled by the anglican acceptance of divorce being a fact of life in a pluralist community, anglicans in turn are puzzled by the ways in which the roman catholic church makes use of the procedures of nullity.

As to the 'serious dialogue based upon the holy gospels and the ancient common traditions', the success of the International Theological Commission in producing its unanimous reports on the Eucharist (1971), and on Ordination and Ministry (1973), may be attributed to its concern for just those primitive authorities to which the Common Declaration appealed. As the two reports fructify discussion and understanding, their influence will grow, and their authority will increase from being that of the authors alone into being that of large awareness that the documents describe what is meant by Eucharist and priesthood. On the question of Orders, Pope Leo XIII in *Apostolicae Curae* had decided the issue in relation to sixteenth century controversies concerning the nature of sacrifice. The report goes behind those controversies, and without suggesting what ministries are valid and what ministries are not, it asks: 'what does it mean to be a priest?', and it answers the question in relation to the unique priesthood of Christ, the priesthood of the Church as a whole and the special priesthood of the ordained man.

The theological dialogue now approaches the more difficult terrain of authority, which includes of course the concept of infallibility. Meanwhile the ecumenical movement in general is encour-

tering frustrations. Not surprisingly, a period of advance is followed by a period when conservative elements in the different traditions become anxious about the defence of some of the old values. Not surprisingly also, many young christians are weary of questions about ecclesiastical structures, are apt to say 'a plague on all of them', and to pursue a 'non-institutional' christianity. But if older quests in ecumenism grow outmoded, newer ones appear. 'Charismatic' renewal is no longer a matter for sects, for it pulsates within the sacramental life of roman catholic and anglican and other churches. The trend of social activism, which had been strongly present in the west, is now overtaken by a new quest for prayer and contemplation. Nor does the seriousness of theological concern and integrity diminish amongst those who care for it. So renewal happens, and when it happens, it helps the fulfilment of our Lord's prayer, *ut omnes unum sint*. Maybe the ecumenical task will be as much within the christian traditions as between them, as christian statesmen strive to help old wisdom and historic tradition on the one hand, and new liveliness on the other hand to learn from one another.