

THEOLOGICAL TRENDS

INTERCOMMUNION I

IN THE LAST year or two public discussion has developed in the Roman Catholic Church in England on the question of intercommunion, prompted to some extent by Archbishop Coggan's appeals. It took place in other Churches ten or fifteen years ago, and subsequently died away: everything there was to say had been said, and people then made their own decisions. It is a complex question, raising so many different issues. It is also one of those questions where there are good arguments on either side, so that at the end of the day it is a matter of discernment and decision where the weight is seen to lie. In this and in two subsequent articles an attempt will be made to map out the various issues at least in summary fashion.

It may be well to begin with what is now a generally accepted terminology that makes for clarity. It is first of all necessary to distinguish between *admission to Communion* and intercommunion. Admission is a one-way process, the act of one Church allowing members of other Churches to receive at its own Communion. The term *Open Communion* usually means admission of all who are baptized and communicant members of their own Churches. *Free Communion* is admission of all who believe in Christ (or 'all who love the Lord Jesus') without specification of baptism. *Intercommunion*, however, designates a two-way process, an agreement between Churches about mutual admission – but between Churches not in full communion with each other: one would not speak of intercommunion between Orthodox Churches or Churches of the Anglican Communion.

I. PRECONCILIAR REJECTION

As is well known, the general attitude of the Catholic Church before Vatican II was one of total rejection, not only of any eucharistic sharing with other Christians, but of all forms of sharing in the sacraments (*communicatio in sacris*) and even of joint non-sacramental worship (*communicatio in spiritualibus*). This attitude was based on three theological grounds, which must now be briefly indicated.

(a) *Unity in faith.* The historic reason for the ex-communication, or cutting off from eucharistic sharing, of individuals or of whole bodies of Christians was from the earliest days the conviction that he or they had deserted the faith. This could be by grave public sin or by heresy. There was, and there has persisted, a deep sense that the Eucharist is a celebration of those united in christian faith, and that it must also be a safeguard and protection of that unity. And this was the case for centuries before there was any controversy about eucharistic belief. Obviously, any question of conflicting beliefs about

the Eucharist itself raises most sensitive issues and causes particular obstacles: how can we participate fully in common celebration of the Eucharist, if we do not mean the same thing by what we do, if 'they' assert what 'we' find repugnant or deny what to us is central?

At the same time history makes plain what double-edged weapons excommunication and the search for doctrinal precision have proved to be. Demands for all to subscribe to a single formula have produced great divisions among Christians and have always excluded something of the truth. Even though it be granted that the Church needs to define itself for the sake of its identity, and that a point exists somewhere when those who differ can no longer share in the Church's central act of worship and self-affirmation, experience teaches that the point should be reached only with extreme reluctance, in a humble and not in a triumphant spirit, and after every attempt at reconciliation has been made.

(b) *Ecclesial communion.* Earlier ages did not make the distinctions we have become accustomed to, and would perhaps criticize us in the west for losing the perspective of God's transcendent and mysterious action. Right up to the ninth century there was a quasi-identification of the risen body of the Lord, his body the Church and his eucharistic body as 'the three-fold body of Christ'.¹ In unfolding the eucharistic mystery to those baptized at the paschal vigil, Augustine explained that, when the priest stands before us at Communion and says, 'The Body of Christ', we reply, 'Amen', meaning 'Yes, we are'.²

From such a theology there arises the closest possible link, a quasi-identification, between ecclesial communion and eucharistic Communion. Augustine struggled for the truth that those baptized in schism were indeed baptized. But he did not contest the assertion that they were outside the Church and the means of salvation: their baptism could only have its saving effect when they were reconciled with the Church. Subsequent centuries softened these hard edges in respect of salvation 'outside the Church', in particular with regard to the Orthodox Churches when the schism had become complete; and christian baptism was recognized as having its saving effects in Churches regarded as schismatic or heretical. But the bond between ecclesial and eucharistic communion remained unquestioned.

(c) *The minister of the Eucharist.* The question of the validity of orders in other Churches does not arise if one is only considering admission to Communion, but obviously does so when the reciprocal process of intercommunion is in question. The Catholic Church has set on one side the eastern Churches (both orthodox and heretical) and the Old Catholics as having true bishops and true priests, and other western Churches on the other as having lost valid orders. If ordination consists in the transmission of powers, then with the loss of orders went the loss of power to consecrate the eucharistic

¹ See H. de Lubac, *Corpus Mysticum* (Paris, 2nd ed. 1949).

² Sermons 227, 272.

elements, to change them into the Body and Blood of Christ. Hence eucharistic celebrations would have only a symbolic value: reception of the elements would not be Holy Communion. The possibility of intercommunion simply could not arise.

Some Catholics, without questioning the truth of these positions, have nevertheless urged the propriety of the reception of Communion at Anglican or Protestant services, in view of the christian and spiritual values present in celebrations thought to be merely symbolic and not true Eucharists; they sometimes add that Protestants themselves accord their eucharistic celebrations a merely figurative meaning, and so no ambiguities are involved. Such a practice, however, is open to very serious criticisms. To take the last point first, the Zwinglian doctrine of pure symbolism in the Eucharist is not the official doctrine of any of the major Churches in Britain, and was of course firmly rejected by Luther and Calvin. The many agreed statements on the Eucharist that have appeared in the last twenty years (from Lambeth 1958 to the Anglican-Roman statement of 1971) should make it plain that one must tread very warily in judging beliefs: even those who are most reluctant to commit themselves to realist formulas (or, indeed, any formulas) have an awareness of a mysterious union with Christ in the Eucharist: one senses their faith in sharing their worship. In any case, they certainly intend to fulfil the wishes of Christ in instituting the sacrament.

Catholics also need to recognize that to receive Communion at the celebration of another Church is ostensibly to recognize the orders of the celebrating minister, and will be understood as such by the host community. That community would not be at all anxious to welcome Catholics (or anyone else) to Communion who had mental reservations about the reality of their eucharistic celebration and eucharistic ministry. Hence sharing in these circumstances is open to grave ambiguities and even deceptions.

2. THE FORCE OF THIS POSITION

The main part of this survey will be taken up with developments in Catholic thought away from this traditional pre-conciliar position, and in particular in the three theological areas designated, viz., unity in faith, ecclesial communion and eucharistic ministry. But before that it will be well to pause and consider certain points of value in the traditional or conservative position.

In the first place, it is not necessarily unecumenical to have a very reserved position on the question of intercommunion. The Catholic Church must be expected to have its own position and to make its own contribution to ecumenical dialogue. The Orthodox Churches have theirs, an even more reserved one; the Free Churches, from their own theological approaches, have theirs.

Secondly, since Vatican II, not all *communicatio in sacris* has been ruled out. The recognition of the 'ecclesial reality' of other christian communities,

that is, the recognition that other western Christians receive the graces of salvation in and through their communities and not in spite of them, has led to considerable developments in the celebration of baptism and of marriage (for instance, the marriage of Catholics in Anglican or Protestant churches). And Catholics have been encouraged, for good reasons, to join as far as they can in the eucharistic services of other Churches. Sharing of this kind in liturgical worship, in addition to joint prayer of all other kinds, can be considered as the appropriate means of furthering unity and of expressing the present midway relationship between sheer division and full communion.

Another factor in the traditional Catholic position is that the Churches which have had a policy of Open or Free Communion have been those in which the Service of the Word has been central in their public worship, and celebration of the Eucharist has been rare and apparently peripheral. Behind such a tradition there lies the theology that what is essential to christian life and worship is a faith that consists in personal response to the preached word of God; a sacramental understanding of the Church and of its worship is weak; the Eucharist, if not an optional extra, because instituted by Christ, is out of the main focus of attention. It is difficult to avoid the impression that for such traditions intercommunion is easier because the Eucharist is not of central importance. And Catholics would not wish to lend any support to such a view. But here too one must tread carefully. In the Presbyterian tradition, for example, as in the Orthodox Churches and in the Catholic Church before Pius X, the reception of Holy Communion is rare but is approached by a very careful preparation; so it is certainly regarded as important. The point, rather, is that in the Free Churches, unlike the Catholic and the Orthodox, the actual celebration of the Eucharist has not been the central weekly act giving the tradition of worship its whole style, character, identity.

Further, it has often been observed that advocacy of Open Communion on the grounds that 'the table is the Lord's, not ours', and that we have no right to exclude any whom he accepts, has not in fact led to any development of, or even desire for, christian unity. All participants in the intercommunion debate have noted that easy intercommunion could become a substitute for striving towards greater christian unity. It would be easy to say: 'Let's just stay as we are and accept our differences and our independence positively, without excluding each other from our worship'. The Catholic tradition (Anglican or Roman) is interested in organic union; many in the Free Churches are extremely apprehensive of it, fearing that their freedom and the variety of their witness will be engulfed in imposed patterns. Hence, it is argued by those pressing for structured forms of unity, barriers to eucharistic sharing act as a spur to greater unity: if distress and a sense of frustration at our separateness are removed by easy eucharistic sharing, we shall simply 'live intercommunion' and cease to desire any advance towards a united Church.

Finally there is the question of unity in faith, to which we shall return more fully later. This remains a central Catholic concern. Regarded as having been slow to enter the ecumenical movement, the Roman Catholic Church could reply that she alone insisted on union in a common faith over many centuries during which the force of the Reformation proved to be divisive and to lead to a growing number of separate christian bodies and differing, even conflicting, confessions. Today she would wish to reaffirm that there can only be unity in a common creed; that plurality of itself is simply plurality, and only oneness can be catholic; and that sharing in the Eucharist cannot be divorced from unity in faith: it presupposes and expresses it.

On the other hand, the cry of 'indifferentism' can be a guise for confusion and even self-deception. Catholics may naively imagine that they alone are guarding against indifferentism. But the word is well known to others too, particularly of the evangelical tradition, and all the main participants in the ecumenical dialogue have insisted that unity cannot come from compromise, still less from neglect of essential beliefs. The cry of 'indifferentism' can come from those who have not understood what efforts for christian unity have meant for those involved in them. And it sometimes comes from those who appear to be indifferent to christian unity itself.

3. RECENT OFFICIAL STATEMENTS

In the documents of Vatican II, within a whole change of attitude to many questions, three passages are of particular significance for inter-communion. The *Decree on Ecumenism* (8) says:

As for common worship, however, it may not be regarded as a means to be used indiscriminately for the restoration of unity among Christians. Such worship depends chiefly upon two principles: it should signify the unity of the Church; it should provide a sharing in the means of grace. The fact that it should signify unity generally rules out common worship. Yet the gaining of a needed grace sometimes commends it.

The practical course to be adopted, after due regard has been given to all the circumstances of time, place, and persons, is left to the prudent decision of the local episcopal authority, unless the Bishops' Conference, according to its own statutes, or the Holy See, has determined otherwise.

The term 'common worship' certainly includes eucharistic sharing. One is at once struck by the openness and liberality of the statement. What may not be used *indiscriminately* for the restoration of unity may be used with discrimination. If the fact that common worship should signify unity *generally* rules it out, then it does not always do so. Finally the statement leaves responsibility for decision to the local bishop, though with the proviso that he may be

bound by subsequent rulings of the local bishops together, or of the Holy See.

A later passage in the *Decree* (22) recognizes that 'baptism constitutes a sacramental bond of unity', and continues:

But baptism is of itself only a beginning, a point of departure, for it is wholly directed towards the acquiring of fulness of life in Christ. Baptism is thus oriented towards a complete profession of faith, a complete incorporation into the system of salvation such as Christ himself willed it to be, and finally towards a complete participation in eucharistic Communion.

The intention of the passage may well have been to say that baptism in other Churches is truly baptism, but it orients a person towards the Roman Catholic Church. But the overt recognition that the reality of baptism outside the Catholic Church constitutes a *sacramental bond* proved to be something of a time-bomb in subsequent theological thought. The baptized are not only incorporated fully into the 'heavenly' Christ but are bound together in his visible body on earth by a sacramental bond; they have the strongest of claims or rights to celebrate the Eucharist together; there have to be overpowering reasons for barring them from the Eucharist, not for admitting them.

The third noteworthy passage from Vatican II comes in the *Decree on the Eastern Catholic Churches*, where fairly liberal conditions are given for intercommunion between Catholics and those of Eastern Churches separated from Rome (nn 26-29). Easterns are to be admitted to the Catholic Eucharist 'if they ask of their own accord and have the right dispositions': nothing more. Catholics may receive from validly ordained Eastern priests where there is 'genuine spiritual benefit and when access to a Catholic priest is physically or morally impossible'. There are two points of great interest about this passage. The first is that it is expressly stated that this intercommunion of individuals is permitted 'in order to promote closer union' (26): so the principle is admitted that *intercommunion may be used as a means to bring about unity*. The second is that no distinction is made between separated 'orthodox' or 'heretical' Eastern Christians: so no rigid idea of unity in faith, and clearly not acceptance of the papacy, is required as a pre-condition.

The *Ecumenical Directory*, Part I (1967), and the *Instruction on admission to Communion* (1972) are documents of the Unity Secretariat, signed by the Pope, implementing the conciliar decrees. The *Directory* almost entirely closed the door opened by the Council's *Decree on Ecumenism* (8). It instanced danger of death or 'in urgent need (during persecution, in prisons)' as cases where western Christians could be admitted to Communion. The cases suggested were so extreme that the ruling amounted to 'for all practical purposes, never'. Further, even in such extreme cases four conditions had to be fulfilled: the 'separated brother' must ask spontaneously, he must have no access to his own minister, he must be rightly disposed, he must declare a faith in the Eucharist in harmony with that of the Church. There was under-

standably some murmuring at the procedure whereby a curial document so limited the force of a conciliar decree: surely Pope John had not intended his Secretariat for Unity to be a source of restrictive canon law? Was a Directory law or was it guidelines? The fact was overlooked that the paragraph continued: 'In other cases the judge of this urgent necessity must be the diocesan bishop or the Episcopal Conference' (*Directory*, 55). There must still be 'urgent necessity' but there were 'other cases', and some of the initiative given them by the Council was apparently left to bishops. Five years later the *Instruction* took some steps forward. The four conditions were repeated, and after some liberal interpretations publicised by bishops in Alsace and in Wisconsin, there was an 'Interpretative Note' (1973) calling them to order and insisting that all four conditions must be fulfilled together. But at the same time there were some significant changes. The emphasis was shifted from dramatic physical circumstances (death, persecution, prison) to 'serious spiritual need . . . a need for an increase in spiritual life and a need for a deeper involvement in the mystery of the Church and of its unity'. There was insistence that the Directory had left 'fairly wide discretionary power to the episcopal authority' – *sic*! Attention was drawn to the Directory's phrase 'other cases of such urgent necessity', and to the fact that 'Christians may find themselves in grave spiritual need'. Anyone trained in the phraseology of Roman documents knows that 'grave' does not mean anything extreme or unusual, but 'serious' as opposed to 'frivolous' (a bad cold is a 'grave reason' for not going to Mass on Sunday): there is a shift from 'urgent necessity' to 'serious need'.

It does not amount to much, when one thinks of what might have developed from the Council's decrees. It is common knowledge that the Secretary at the time of the Unity Secretariat took a very hard line on intercommunion. If one is to treat the *Instruction* as the Church's law, then the wide discretionary power accorded to bishops is nugatory. The chief flaw in the whole approach to admission to Communion is the wholly individualistic understanding of the graces (the meaning) of the sacrament. Only the spiritual needs of the individual in very unusual circumstances are considered. There is no recognition or appreciation of the essentially corporate nature of the Eucharist, the sacrament of the unity of the Church, which has blossomed so fruitfully since the *Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy*, and the increasingly grave spiritual needs of various groups of Christians who find themselves united. To these we shall return.

4. THE MINISTER OF THE EUCHARIST

The remaining sections of these articles will consider theological thinking since the Council in the three areas listed in section 1 above,³ which form the basis of traditional Catholic attitudes to intercommunion. In the space remaining for this article there can be only the most summary treatment of

³ Cf *supra*, pp 300 ff.

one area. The briefest indications will be given of new considerations that have arisen in the recent debate about the Church's ministry, considerations which affect the ability of Catholics to receive Communion from others rather than to admit them to their own Eucharist.

(1) Modern New Testament study has made plain that patterns of ministry evolved slowly in the Church without Jesus's followers having any sense of being under instructions from him. The pattern of bishop-priest-deacon did not become generally established till late in the second century. There is no evidence of any direct person-to-person transmission of office or of powers from the first apostles down. There is no indication in the New Testament about who could or could not preside at the Eucharist.

(2) One has therefore to realize that the structures of the Church's ministry are not some basic or unchanging object of faith like the incarnation or the resurrection. They owe much to the social and political conditions of the time and the places in which the Church originated, and they have continued to develop in many ways in the course of history.

(3) One may rightly believe that the bishop-priest pattern developed under the guidance of the Holy Spirit, working in history, as an effective way of embodying Christ's pastoral care of his Church and of fulfilling the charge he entrusted to his first followers. One may urge that there are decisive theological values in structuring the Church's ministry that way. But the bishop-priest pattern does not therefore become so *necessary* in the Church's life that a community which rejects it, in the attempt to return to the earliest christian patterns, ceases to have an ordained christian ministry, or ceases (for that reason) to merit the title 'Church'.

(4) It is obviously necessary for the orderliness of the Church, as for any human society, to have accepted agents of responsibility and authority. And so any break away from recognized authority can raise questions of legitimacy: there can be accusations of schism. But, even supposing a christian community is at fault in break-away action, it does not therefore lose the ability to appoint christian ministers or to celebrate the Eucharist.

(5) Contemporary theology has progressively given up the idea that ordination is a transmission of powers from one ordained minister to another. Apostolic succession must be understood in broader terms: the inner reality of the continuity of the Church in the apostolic faith, life and mission; the outward sign of this continuity in the continuity of ministry. Bishops, for instance, are more properly thought of as succeeding to sees than to their predecessors. The local episcopal church, and not simply the bishop, is the sign of apostolic succession.

(6) At the Last Supper, the Twelve represent the whole Church, not just Church leaders: the number twelve signifies the True Israel, Christ's followers. So it was the Church that Jesus told to celebrate the Eucharist as his memorial (as Paul writing to the Corinthians supposes). It is proper and orderly that there should be appointed and designated ministers or presidents of the Eucharist. But no conclusive reason can be adduced for asserting that

a body of Christians is *unable* to celebrate the Eucharist without such a minister. Indeed, one can argue that those baptized into Christ's Body must be able to celebrate the sacrament of his Body when they gather in his name.⁴

(7) These considerations in many respects undercut the traditional discussions about Anglican orders. The argument of *Apostolicae Curae* is that the framers and users of the Edwardine ordinal positively excluded any idea of sacrificial priesthood; they thereby excluded the essence of christian ministry from their intention; this cancels their intention to ordain christian ministers of word and sacraments; therefore their ordinations were invalid (that is, ineffectual); therefore the Church of England lost the power of transmitting the priesthood and could not regain it simply by revising the ordinal at a later date. This argument is now open to question at a number of points.

(i) The argument had more force when the central sacramental act of ordaining was thought to be the handing over of the chalice and paten, the bread and the wine, with the accompanying words about receiving power to offer the Mass. But Pius XII in 1947 declared the central act to be the laying on of hands with the prayer of consecration. The Edwardine ordinal is certainly an acceptable form in itself, and the intention of its users must also be judged at least sufficient.

(ii) At the time of the Bull the essence of the ministry was defined as sacrificial priesthood. A far broader theology of christian ministry has since developed, and it is now very doubtful whether positively to exclude the idea of sacrificial priesthood is to exclude the essence of the ministry.

(iii) The argument relies on a doctrine of conflicting intentions, which was never more than a theological opinion.

(iv) The argument further relies on the assumption that ordaining consists in a transmission of powers by the bishop, which, as has been said, is increasingly questioned. This is one of the points at which the Anglican-Roman Catholic agreed statement on the Ministry is significant as much by what it omits as by what it asserts.

(v) In view of these considerations, *Apostolicae Curae* is judged by some theologians, not as a definitive doctrinal statement, but as a prudential juridical judgment, conditioned by the theological perspectives of the time, and in accordance with the accepted doctrine that in matters affecting the validity of sacraments the more conservative position should be taken when there is any ground of doubt.

(8) It is a mistake to isolate ministry from other questions of the apostolic faith, life and mission of a christian community. If one day Rome were to say to the Church of England, 'We agree after all that you have a true ministry; therefore you are in the full sense a Church'; Anglicans could with reason reply, 'No: we are in the full sense a Church, therefore we have a true ministry'. The ministry does not constitute the Church. Nor, indeed,

⁴ Cf section 1(a) of this article, pp 300-301.

does the Church constitute the ministry by being logically or chronologically prior to it. Christ instituted a Church-with-a-ministry, even if he did not specify its ordering. Hence the recognition by Vatican II of the 'ecclesial reality' of other christian communities is seen as a first step in a process that leads towards global or total recognition, through dialogue and through concrete co-operation. And this, incidentally, is the perspective and challenge of the Ten Propositions of the Churches' Unity Commission.

(9) The word 'valid' has had a very chequered history. People have come to think that legitimate Church authority can declare that a sacrament is effective or ineffective (an ordination or a Eucharist for example). But is this the case? Legitimate Church authority can 'guarantee' the reality and effectiveness of an ordination or a Eucharist: this is of the nature of a sacrament, which is the assured embodiment of Christ's saving action. But can legitimate authority guarantee the ineffectiveness of sacramental action? To do so would be to imply that the power of God is restricted to the recognized procedures. The Church can do no more than leave the matter in doubt, by withholding that guarantee or embodiment of God's assurance, which she herself *is* and exists to convey. To say that a sacramental absolution is invalid is not to say that sins are not forgiven, but to withhold the assurance that they are. And so for any sacrament – baptism, marriage, ordination, Eucharist. To say that a Eucharist is invalid is to say that no assurance is given that the bread and wine are changed into the Body and Blood of Christ. The point can be summarized by saying that the reality of sacraments is a matter of faith: within this faith there are empirical criteria of reality and ineffectiveness; there are no empirical criteria of ineffectiveness.

(10) The state of doubt in which these last considerations leave us is being resolved for themselves by a growing number of Catholics. It is comparatively easy to dismiss the reality of christian ministry in other Churches by text-book arguments from a position behind one's desk. But the arguments lose credibility when one moves out from a closed circle of experience and encounters in the concrete the christian life and ministry of other communities: their faith, their love of our Lord, their self-sacrifice for others, their devout celebration of the Eucharist and receiving of Holy Communion. From such experience of actual involvement with other Christians there is growing up from below a *de facto* recognition of Anglican and Protestant orders. This kind of conviction is personal. It grows by degrees out of one's own experience of and involvement with other Christians. It cannot be made public or available to those who have not shared the experience. It can only await the day when legitimate Church authority gives the recognition and assurance it has hitherto withheld. But it makes not only admission to Communion, but intercommunion, a real possibility to be considered.

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