

THE CHURCH AND THE CHURCHES

By EDWARD YARNOLD

IN ABOUT 1948, when I belonged to a community of jesuit scholastics studying philosophy at Heythrop College, then in Oxfordshire, the father of one of us once joined us at a picnic tea at one of the huts in the woods that helped to make life pleasant there. He was a Congregationalist Minister. It will sound scarcely believable to those not of mature age and without long memories, but it cost me considerable pains of conscience before I invited him to say grace for us. It was only during the Second World War that permission had been given for Catholics to join non-Catholics in reciting the Lord's Prayer at a public meeting. If a Catholic attended a non-Catholic wedding or funeral, he was to do so only for social reasons; he was not to join in the prayers and hymns; and, if possible, in order to make it clear that he was not participating in the service, he was not to stand and kneel with the rest of the congregation. We had learnt in the Catechism that one of the ways of putting one's faith at risk was to 'join in the worship and prayers of a false religion'. The great bogey was indifferentism: you must never give non-Catholics the impression that you believed it did not much matter to which denomination you belonged. Error had no rights; a Catholic government should suppress other religions if it were free to do so.

Even before Vatican II the thaw was beginning, here and there; but it was only at the Council that ecumenism became the official policy of the Church, not without a struggle and a sense of discovery or conversion on the part of many of the bishops. The purpose of this article is to consider some of the ways in which the Catholic Church's relationship with other Churches has changed in the last fifteen years or so.

Models of the Church

An important contribution to the understanding of the Church which has received considerable approval has been made by Avery Dulles, in his work *Models of the Church*.¹ He suggests that we can best grow in understanding of the Church, not by formulating newer, more refined definitions, but by the use of 'models': that is, images which bring together into a symbolic unity some of the leading characteristics of the subject being studied. Scientists use models to express patterns observed in natural phenomena. The example is often quoted of two models which clarify the behaviour of light: that is, the models of a wave and a particle. Often — as happens in the case of light — no single model will succeed in expressing all the observed characteristics of the subject, so that two or more need to be retained even though they are not entirely consistent; it is necessary to say, for example, that light travels in some ways like a wave, in other ways like a stream of particles.

Dulles uses the method to clarify the nature of the Church. He suggests there are five main models: an institution (that is, a society with an observable structure); a mystical communion, or the people of God (that is, a society of people united with a sense of community or fellowship, *koinonia*, through unity with Christ); a sacrament (that is, a visible means of contact with Christ); a herald (to proclaim God's word); a servant (united with Jesus, who came not to be served but to serve mankind). Just as both of the models of light need to be taken together if one is to represent all the characteristics of the subject, so all five models of the Church are required if one is to include all the characteristics of the Church. Moreover, just as the two models of light are not completely compatible, so too there are certain inconsistencies among the five models of the Church. Thus, Robert Murray has recently applied them to the question whether it is right to share communion with Christians of other churches.² He shows that the model of the institution is inconsistent with intercommunion, for communion is the sign of membership of one's organized Church; but if the Church is seen as a dynamic sacrament, a less rigid attitude is called for. A further application of Dulles's analysis will become apparent later.

¹ Dublin, 1976. There was also an earlier American edition.

² 'Intercommunion: a turning-point?', in the *London Tablet*, 11 February 1978.

The Catholic attitude to other Churches in general

The saying 'no salvation outside the Church' has never been officially repudiated. Still, for centuries now the Church has rejected the literal interpretation of it, so that in 1953 a group of Bostonians, who insisted that no one apart from Roman Catholics could be saved, had paradoxically to suffer excommunication for their intransigence. Just as the New Testament doctrine that baptism is necessary for salvation became tempered by the recognition that those who were not sacramentally baptized might have received baptism 'of desire', by virtue of a *votum baptismi*, so those Christians who were not formally members of the Roman Catholic Church might belong to it if they had a *votum ecclesiae* or implicit desire of the Church: that is, if it was only 'invincible ignorance' (a far from complimentary synonym for error in good faith) which was keeping them out. In recent years, however, Roman Catholic thinking on the subject has developed in five directions:

1. Many theologians, most notably perhaps Karl Rahner, have clarified the reasons why it is necessary to be a member of the Church in order to be a follower of Christ. There is, of course, evidence in the New Testament which suggests that not only the apostles but Christ himself thought fit to organize his followers into a visible society, with appointed officers and a defined procedure for admission; the new Israel was to some extent to reproduce the patterns of the old. In addition, one can point to the need inherent in human nature for principles of life to be given a social expression. Rahner has also explored the link between the Church and the Incarnation. The Incarnation is the fullest realization of God's self-communication which takes place not only in man's internal experience but in the events of history; this relationship with the Incarnate Word needs to be continually offered to man not only in his private conscience but with an authority coming from outside him and still 'incarnated' in historical form: that is, through the Church. Here Rahner is developing the teaching of Vatican II that the Church itself, and not only its rites, is 'a sign and instrument . . . of communion with God and of unity among all men'.³

One possible inference that might be drawn from this conviction that one cannot be a follower of Christ without being a member of the Church is that those who do not belong to the Roman Catholic Church are not followers of Christ. Since, however, such a conclusion

³ K. Rahner, *Foundations of Christian Faith* (London, 1978), pp 343-44. *Lumen Gentium*, 1.

is all too evidently at variance with observable facts, logic points in the opposite direction: all who are true followers of Christ belong somehow to his Church.

2. There has developed also in recent years a sense of the importance of what is sometimes called the 'wider ecumenism'. The number of non-Christians in the world is increasing faster than the number of the baptized. The situation is even more serious: many of the baptized seem to retain no more than a nominal attachment to a Church or even to the christian faith; and, in Britain at least, the number of baptisms is declining. We can no longer therefore regard the non-Christians simply as the mission-field, where a harvest of potential christian converts stands ready for the reaping; we need to consider how they are saved without becoming Christians.

Karl Rahner's suggestion that all others can be considered as 'anonymous' (that is, implicit) Christians is a great help towards solving this problem. His theory accounts for three facts: first, that God's will to save all mankind is hopelessly frustrated if the majority of mankind which is unbaptized is not saved; secondly, that, if 'he who is not with me is against me',⁴ there is no such thing as purely natural moral goodness without grace; thirdly, that all grace comes from the 'one mediator between God and men, the man Christ Jesus',⁵ and therefore can be received only through faith in him. In every good choice, then, the non-Christian, and even the good agnostic or atheist, by the help of grace is embracing the true good, and in so doing is welcoming Christ, who embodies all human goodness. This theory accords well with the account of the Last Judgment in Matthew 25, where the just discover that they have been feeding and clothing Christ without realizing it.

The objection is sometimes made against Rahner's theory that talk about 'anonymous Christians' is an insult to the integrity of the non-Christian, who is being valued, not for his own convictions as, say, a Hindu or a Marxist, but for being what he would vehemently deny, namely an implicit Christian. However, the term is not intended to be addressed to Hindus and Marxists. It is offered for the use of christian theologians as a shorthand way of referring to the conviction that the good non-Christian is saved, saved through Christ, and saved not despite himself but through the grace which has led him to be with Christ rather than against him.

⁴ Mt 12, 30. Cf Rahner, *op cit.*, p 176.

⁵ 1 Tim 2, 5.

3. More recognition has been paid to the role which the non-Catholic's own Church plays in his salvation; Catholic theologians no longer say, as some used to say, that a non-Catholic Christian is saved not through his membership of, say, the Methodist Church, but in spite of it. This issue is sometimes raised in the form of the question whether non-Catholic ecclesial communities are rightly described as Churches. The Decree on Ecumenism of Vatican II makes no bones about speaking of the 'Churches of the East' and the 'patriarchal Churches', in reference to the Orthodox. For various reasons, however, the christian bodies springing from the Reformation are described more cautiously as 'Churches and ecclesial communities'.⁶ It is true that Pope Paul VI used the phrase 'the Anglican Church' at the canonization of the Forty Martyrs of England and Wales, when he could easily without offence have spoken of the Anglican 'Communion', as Anglicans themselves do; and he spoke of the Roman Church's desire to embrace 'her ever beloved sister in the one authentic communion of the family of Christ'.⁷ Nevertheless, despite this willingness to accord the title 'Church' to non-Catholic bodies, the Catholic Church claims for itself a unique position. (It is not right to cease making the claim for fear it may sound arrogant; humility does not require one to deny, indeed it prompts one to acknowledge, what has been received from God as an undeserved grace, which carries obligations.)

The traditional Catholic formulation of this point is that the one true Church founded by Christ is the Roman Catholic Church, and it alone; and such a statement was in fact included in the early drafts of the Decree on the Church of Vatican II. This statement was subsequently modified in two ways. First, two sentences were added, stating that 'many elements of sanctification and truth are found outside "the visible confines" of the Roman Catholic Church', which, being 'gifts belonging to the Church of Christ . . . are forces impelling towards Catholic unity'. Later, the statement that the Church of Christ is identical with the Roman Catholic Church was changed,

⁶ *Unitatis Redintegratio*, 13, 19.

⁷ 'There will be no seeking to lessen the legitimate prestige and the worthy patrimony of piety and usage proper to the Anglican Church when the Roman Catholic Church — this humble Servant of the Servants of God — is able to embrace her ever beloved Sister in the one authentic communion of the family of Christ: a communion of origin and of faith, a communion of priesthood and of rule, a communion of the Saints in the freedom and love of the Spirit of Jesus'. *Acta Apostolicae Sedis*, 62 (1970), p 753.

so that it now affirms that Christ's Church '*subsists in* the Catholic Church'.⁸

The exact meaning of the word 'subsists' is not clear, nor perhaps did even the bishops themselves quite understand what they meant by it. The official explanation given was that this new expression was 'more consistent with the statement concerning elements of the Church which are present elsewhere'; at the same time, the request for a statement implying that Christ's Church 'subsists in' other christian communities even to a limited degree was summarily rejected. The mind of the Council, therefore, seems to be that the Roman Catholic Church, whatever its shortcomings, *is* the embodiment in history of the Church Christ founded; whereas other Churches are indeed the source of the sanctification of their members, but not the historical embodiment of the Church Christ founded.

But this may not be the Church's last word on the matter. As Dulles points out in the book discussed above, this attitude towards non-Catholic Churches matches the institutional model of the Church. It needs, however, to be examined in the light of the other models. The model of mystical *communion* suggests that other Churches are part of that communion, in accordance with St Augustine's principle that the Church is where the Spirit is. Other Churches can be *sacraments* of encounter with Christ, though their separation from the Roman See makes them an imperfect sign. Other Churches can be *heralds* of God's word. Other Churches can be united with Christ in the *service* of mankind. It seems then that there is no straightforward answer to the question whether these are part of Christ's Church; the answer can only be 'yes and no'.

4. There is another way in which the Church's attitude to other Churches has changed; there is fuller realization that not only theological but even dogmatic statements are often (some would say 'always') expressed in terms that reflect the philosophical interests of one particular age. They are answers to yesterday's questions in yesterday's terms. But if the Church affirms them as dogmas, today's answers to today's questions must be consistent with these dogmas, even if today's questions need to be answered in very different terms. For example, what Trent said about the Real Presence in terms of substance and appearances provides a certain point of reference for restating the doctrine in terms of

⁸ *Lumen Gentium*, 8. The progressive modifications of the draft can be traced in *Constitutionis Dogmaticae Lumen Gentium Synopsis Historica* (ed G. Alberigo, Bologna, 1975).

symbol and reality, or whatever concepts are thought appropriate for the expression of Eucharistic doctrine today.

This recognition of the historical character of dogmatic pronouncements (which is not at all the same as dogmatic relativism, that is, the denial of all objective truth in doctrine) is not just the private opinion of some theologians. It is the official teaching of the Catholic Church, contained in the document *Mysterium Ecclesiae* of the Sacred Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith.⁹ Pope John XXIII's distinction between the unchanging 'substance of the ancient doctrine of the deposit of faith' and the changeable 'way in which it is presented' was an expression of the same principle in more popular terms.¹⁰

This understanding of the nature of dogmatic statements is of great ecumenical importance. If the same truth of faith can be expressed in a variety of different ways, Catholics must not anathematize other Christians simply because they do not see fit to adopt traditional catholic ways of expressing a doctrine. The non-Catholic statement of the doctrine may be a sufficiently faithful expression of the truth in different terms. Catholics ought not to say to Protestants that reunion is possible only if they agree to adopt sacrificial terminology in their Eucharistic liturgies; nor should Protestants say that reunion is possible only if Catholics agree to abolish such language. True reunion can come about only if we can welcome one another as fellow-sharers of the christian faith; but this does not require us to insist that the other party express the faith in our own theological language. Indeed, variety in the statements of a christian doctrine is desirable, in so far as each statement lights up the truth from a different angle.

Of course a difficulty still remains. How can we be sure that others hold the same faith as ourselves if they express it in different terms? The International Theological Commission tried to provide an answer to this question in a statement entitled 'Unity of the faith and theological pluralism'.¹¹ As it turns out, the Commission proposes a number of points relevant to an answer, but does not bring the points together into a single statement. If it had, it might have said that the standard by which statements of doctrine are measured is provided by the Church's own experience of Christ, which is based on the prayerful reading of Scripture, guided by previous definitions,

⁹ Promulgated 24 June 1973. English translation in the *London Tablet*, 14 July 1973.

¹⁰ *The Documents of Vatican II*, ed. W. M. Abbott (London and Dublin, 1966), p 715.

¹¹ Cf the *London Tablet*, 7 July 1975.

and expressed in the lives of its members. Thus Catholic instinct rejects the argument of the *Myth of God incarnate*, not because it denies the doctrine of the Incarnation, but because it contradicts the Church's experience of its relationship with the living Christ.¹²

5. One further development in the Church's relations with others must be mentioned: its clearer recognition of its vocation to serve all human beings, not simply as a missionary Church, proclaiming the Gospel to all men in the hope of bringing them to faith in Christ, but at their service even in secular affairs, bringing the light of Christ to the solution of every human problem. This is not of course to claim, as Marxists sometimes do, to provide the universal principles according to which even scientific problems must be solved. The problems on which Christianity sheds a light are those concerning the understanding of human nature: moral, educational, sociological, psychological questions. The christian understanding of God's plan for the salvation of mankind makes christian truth a 'saving truth',¹³ even as far as this world is concerned. The Church opposes, say, abortion, not only because it is against God's law, but as anti-human.

The Church's relations with other Churches in particular

In the last decade the Catholic Church has engaged in dialogue, at national and international levels, with a number of other Churches. Perhaps best known is the work of the Anglican/Roman Catholic International Commission (ARCIC). This Commission has published three Agreed Statements: on the Eucharist (1971), the Ministry and Ordination (1973) and Authority in the Church (1976).¹⁴ These documents have received close scrutiny from hierarchies, synods and individuals in both Churches; and when the Commission has completed its present task of clarifying the statements in the light of comments that have been received, it will be up to the highest authorities in the two Churches to commit themselves either for or against the statements. Even a favourable verdict, however, will not necessarily remove all obstacles to reunion; for the statements are agreements about theological theory. There will still remain the need to apply the theory to certain practical problems, such as the questions of the validity of Anglican orders and the ordination of women. It takes much longer to heal a schism than to cause one.

¹² Ed. J. Hick (London, 1977).

¹³ *Dei Verbum*, 7.

¹⁴ The Catholic Truth Society of London published the three Statements conveniently in a single pamphlet entitled *The Three Agreed Statements*.

It was for this reason that the Preparatory Commission which worked out ARCIC's terms of reference suggested in its Malta Report (1968) a programme of 'reunion by stages'.¹⁵ The first stage was concluded with the completion of the Preparatory Commission's work; eleven years later we are still far from completing the work of the Stage Two. According to this plan, the essential event of the second stage is to be the mutual recognition by the two Churches that they share the same faith. Acceptance of the three Agreed Statements would go a long way towards making this recognition possible, but fundamental difficulties remain. Many Catholics wonder how the mutual recognition of faith can have any meaning if there is no firm exercise of teaching authority among Anglicans, if indeed Anglicans treasure comprehensiveness so highly that outright denials of the Incarnation and the Trinity by clergy in high places pass uncensured.¹⁶

Let us therefore propose an imaginary but realistic 'scenario'. ARCIC in its clarification of the Statements reaches agreement over every issue except papal primacy of jurisdiction. The pope, in consultation with all the Catholic bishops on the one side, and the Lambeth Conference and all Anglican national Synods on the other, endorse the Statements. A state of 'nearly perfect communion' is officially established between the two Churches, like that established a few years ago between the Roman Catholics and the Old Catholic Church of Utrecht. The validity of Anglican orders is secured either by a form of conditional ordination, or by a declaration that the Bull of 1896 which condemned Anglican orders no longer has force because of the changed circumstances, or because it was erroneous in the first place. Anglicans and Catholics can now share communion, not only in emergencies when a person is unable to receive in his own Church, but on occasions of special celebration even when there is no such emergency. Anglicans would recognize the pope as a focus of unity, without submitting to his jurisdiction.

Full communion, when it came in God's good time, would perhaps be according to Cardinal Mercier's slogan, 'united not absorbed'. The Anglican Communion would be treated, after the

¹⁵ The Malta Report has been printed in various collections: e.g. *Anglican/Roman Catholic Dialogue: the Work of the Preparatory Commission*, ed A. C. Clark and C. Davey (London, New York and Toronto, 1974).

¹⁶ I am thinking of some Anglican contributions to *The Myth of God Incarnate*, and G. W. H. Lampe, *God as Spirit* (London, 1977).

model of some of the uniate churches like the Maronites, as a separate patriarchate under the Archbishop of Canterbury, with its own canon law, liturgy and traditions. Anglicans would acknowledge the pope's primacy of jurisdiction, but would be affected by it only when it was needed to repair some breakdown in the working of the Anglican jurisdiction, or when there was need of a final court of appeal. The pope would remain the one who called and presided over general councils, and who was entrusted with the primatial role of speaking to the world in the name of the whole Church. This Roman primacy is not best described as a primacy of honour — except the honour that is due to a father; the claim of honours accords ill with one who is the servant of the servants of God, and who represents the One who, thinking equality with God not a matter of grasping, emptied himself and took the form of a servant.¹⁷ The primacy would be of service, love and authority.

We are all conditioned by our history. Most non-Catholics have been brought up to see the papacy as an anachronistic mixture of authoritarianism and quaint ceremony. It is up to Catholics to convince them that it really is what it claims to be in theory, a primacy of service and love. However extensive the achievement of theologians in reaching agreement on matters of theory, reunion will never be a reality until ordinary people are attracted to it as a practical possibility. The short pontificate of John Paul I, and the auspicious beginning made by his successor, gives good hope that non-Catholics are coming to see the value of the papacy and to long for a share in it.

We have been taking an optimistic glance at a possible development in Anglican/Catholic relations. We should not, however, lose sight of the important achievements of Catholic dialogue with other traditions. For several years, officially established commissions have been engaged in talks at international level with Lutherans, Methodists, Pentecostals and the World Council of Churches, and agreed reports have been produced, often representing a surprising degree of doctrinal unanimity. Preliminary talks with the Orthodox Churches have been in progress for some time, and it is expected that full-scale dialogue will begin very shortly. What is most striking and encouraging is the extent to which the agreed statements, produced by these various two-party conversations, are in

¹⁷ Cf Phil 2, 6-7. Footnote 7 above suggests that my scenario, though imaginary, is not pure fantasy.

close accord with one another, showing the emergence of a common mind throughout christendom.

This is most clearly seen in discussions centred on the Eucharist. There have been joint declarations on this subject by at least six ecumenical bodies: ARCIC, a body of American Roman Catholics and Lutherans, the *Groupe des Dombes* (a French body of Roman Catholics and Protestants of different traditions), the Faith and Order Commission of the World Council of Churches, the International Commission of the World Methodist Council and the Roman Catholic Church, and the Anglican/Orthodox Commission for Joint Doctrinal Discussions.¹⁸ The wide extent of agreement in these six reports indicates that there is truly a christian consensus on the Eucharist, even though the various Churches choose different terms in which to express their beliefs.

Convergences

Karl Rahner, with his flair for exposing popular misconceptions, asks why God permits divisions in the Church.¹⁹ He grants that the original divisions were partly the result of human guilt, as Church leaders on both Catholic and non-Catholic sides have now courageously confessed. But, Rahner maintains, this fact should not lead us to think, as is often suggested, that the divisions are kept in being by the guilt of our own generation. There are doubtless people who cherish jealousy and hatred for members of other Churches; if Rahner lived in Northern Ireland he would perhaps be more ready to recognize that culpability for division still persists. But he is surely right when he says: 'In a human judgment and also in an optimism about salvation which is completely justified, and which indeed is required of Christians as the virtue of hope, we can even say that on all sides, in Christianity at least, the majority of Christians really exist in an interior, positive and guiltless relationship to their Church and to the other Churches'.

We are therefore entitled to ask, Rahner continues, what God's reason can be for allowing the evil of division to continue. One plausible reason, though Rahner himself does not suggest it, is that, since God does not (or even cannot) force human moral development, it takes a long time for the psychological and cultural scars of a schism to be healed, just as a broken marriage cannot at once be

¹⁸ The first four statements are conveniently collected in *Modern Eucharistic Agreement* (London, 1973).

¹⁹ Rahner, *op. cit.*, pp 378-79.

mended, even though both partners may desire to put the pieces together. Rahner himself prefers to seek the 'positive salvific meaning' of christian divisions; it is, he suggests, that the divided Churches 'have to force each other mutually to be and to become as christian as possible, and to understand a little better what is really radical about the christian message'. In other words, Catholics are impelled to examine their position in comparison with that of other Christians, so as to learn the value not only of their own faith but also of the insights of the other Churches. What was said earlier about the *value* of due pluriformity is relevant here. Divisions challenge Catholics to become more Protestant and Protestants to become more Catholic, without ceasing to be true to themselves.

Examples of this development can already be seen in the Catholic Church: the renewed emphasis on the scriptures and on preaching in Catholic liturgy and spirituality; the adoption of a vernacular liturgy; the more explicit recognition that personal faith and conversion are necessary if the sacraments and good works are to be means of salvation; the affirmation of the overriding right of conscience; the understanding that christian authority should be exercised in humility and the desire to serve, rather than in an autocratic spirit or an attachment to external pomp; the knowledge that bishops and popes in their teaching do not enjoy a private line to heaven, but need to 'consult the faithful in matters of doctrine' (as Newman put it) in order to be able to declare the mind of the Church; the pruning of the more exotic devotions to the saints; the relegation of indulgences to a marginal place in people's lives.

On the other hand, Protestants are challenged to become more Catholic, and in several ways have already done so. Sunday worship in many of their churches is now centred on the Eucharist; the place of our Lady in the history of salvation and christian devotion is more widely recognized; there is a growing ability to acknowledge the value of a Primate who can be the focus of the unity of all Christians.

One concluding remark. In 1439, a decree of union between the Roman Catholic and the Greek Orthodox Churches was signed at the Council of Florence. Almost as soon as the greek delegates returned to Constantinople, the decree was repudiated because of popular opposition within the Greek Church. So too the work of expert ecumenical commissions will come to nothing unless ordinary Church members really *want* unity and pray for it. Is our desire for reunion so strong that we will be willing to give up anything which stands in the way, except the truth?