

a law of the Christian Church and a condition of salvation.' Little wonder that he chose H. C. Lea to write the chapter on the causes of the Reformation, dealing with the abuses of the Papacy. He could not have found anywhere what Fr Thurston has called a more prejudiced or more persistently inaccurate writer.

'Acton's ultimate thought', writes Mr Fasnacht, 'is that it is the truth that makes us free. And the ultimate truth is that Caesar and God are different. His philosophy is the philosophy of freedom. It might be argued that, in the last analysis, Acton's system contains two indefinables, liberty, which is a thing that grows, and depends on innumerable conditions, and social evolution, which is charged with interminable consequences. But Acton's philosophy is not strictly a system, it is rather a developing spirit.' This is a just appraisal, and the value of Acton to us is to share in the evolution of his spirit and to profit from the many incidental insights which are the by-products of his major preoccupations.



THE CATHOLIC CHURCH AND ECUMENISM

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A REVIEWER in the August number of *Theology* has written that 'Rome's tragic rejection of the Ecumenical Movement is one of the challenges of our day, and it has yet to be faced and met'. By its context, a review of Salmon's *Infallibility of the Church*, this rather cryptic sentence seems to imply that the nature of the Church (as Catholics conceive it) makes Catholicism essentially incapable of absorbing the spirit of Ecumenism. If that were actually the case it would be truer to say that Ecumenism rejects Rome, not that Rome has rejected the Ecumenical Movement.

In order to test the validity of this judgment it is necessary to define what constitutes the essential spirit of Ecumenism, and what are the aims to which it gives birth. But it is

precisely here that a difficulty lies, because the Ecumenical Movement has been fluid in its development, originating in a spontaneous desire for Christian unity, due partly to the threat of world war during the first decade of the century, and partly to the problems set to missionary effort by divisions among Christians. The double source of the desire for unity resulted in the emergence of two tendencies within the growing movement. In one, emphasis was laid upon co-operation between Christian bodies, in spite of differences of doctrine. The compelling motive here was that Christianity might make a united stand against militarism, racial antagonisms and similar evils, which were preparing the world for war. From this tendency was born what came to be known as the *Life and Work Movement*, which held its first great international conference at Stockholm in 1925, under the leadership of Nathan Söderblom, Lutheran Archbishop of Upsala, *nomen praeclarum* in the history of Ecumenism. Parallel with the *Life and Work Movement* ran another tendency. A World Missionary Conference held in Edinburgh in 1910 brought to light a quickened consciousness of the weakening effect in missionary effort of division among Christians. In this way the *Faith and Order Movement* took shape, holding its first International Conference at Lausanne in 1927, at which the subject of discussion was the dogmatic differences which divide Christendom.

From the beginning attempts were made to enlist the co-operation of the Holy See in these movements but these were consistently refused, though with expressions of great charity and goodwill. A decree of the Holy Office dated July 4, 1919, reiterated the ban originally promulgated in 1864 on all conferences intended to promote Christian unity summoned by non-Catholics. A second decree on July 8, 1927, confirmed the necessity of absolute adherence to this ban. Undoubtedly in these first stages of the movement there was much ill-founded optimism about the possibility of achieving unity. It was widely felt that agreement on dogmatic questions was of secondary importance. A loose federation of Churches, bound together not by doctrinal unity but by the desire to work together for the conversion of the world

to Christ, was the kind of unity to be aimed at. Agreement in faith, so far as that was necessary, would follow if Christians of differing beliefs entered into relations of friendship and respect on a basis of collaboration in missionary effort. It was at this point in ecumenical development that Pope Pius XI intervened in 1928 with the first official comment of the Catholic Church on the Ecumenical Movement as such, though the word itself was not used. In the Encyclical *Mortalium animos* he set out with great clarity the Church's teaching on Christian unity, showing that the unique authority with which our Lord had endowed the Church made it impossible for her representatives to take part, as equals amongst equals, in assemblies of the character proposed by the movement. Nor was it lawful for Catholics to give encouragement and support to them, because by doing so they would be giving countenance to a false view of Christianity, alien to the Faith of the One Church of Christ. This verdict was phrased in uncompromising language, which left little room for any appreciation of the aspirations after unity which had given rise to the movement, yet the picture of Ecumenism, as it then was, was a true one, and the condemnation justified by its tendency to be satisfied with undoctinal Pan-Protestantism.

During the years which elapsed between the Stockholm and Lausanne conferences and their successors in 1937 at Edinburgh (*Faith and Order*) and Oxford (*Life and Work*), and largely as a result of the work done by them, an almost revolutionary change took place in the outlook and aims of the movement. This change was brought about directly by the contact of mind with mind, and person with person, in the give and take of ecumenical discussion. Such discussion, on deep theological and allied themes, is carried on in an uncontroversial atmosphere created by the desire to get at truth by seeing it against the background of the other man's mind. As a result of this discussion the facile optimism, which had showed itself in the earlier stages of the movement, has largely disappeared, and certain principles, little realised at first, have come to be recognised as integral to true Ecumenism. Of these principles one of the most important is that though unity must be basically dog-

matic, the road to it is psychological. What is needed is contact in understanding between those who profess opposing faiths in order that the misapprehension created by wide variety of cultural background and tradition may be cleared up before divergence in dogma can be fruitfully discussed. The reports issued by the two world conferences of 1937 make it clear that there is a growing realisation in the Ecumenical Movement that the problem lying at the root of all theological divergence is the problem of the nature of the Church. It would be untrue to say that all glossing over of difficulties has been eliminated from ecumenical thought, but it is certainly true that there have been very great advances in recent years in the desire to go to the roots of everything that now divides Christendom, in the attempt to reach the truth, so that the truth when found may be faced. No Catholic should be insensitive to the great gain of this, or be ready to deny that here the work of the Holy Spirit may be seen.

This change in the outlook of Ecumenism has not gone unobserved by the Holy See. Caution remains a marked characteristic of its approach, but it would appear that there is a corresponding change in its own attitude. As a result of the two World Conferences at Oxford and Edinburgh it was decided that the two movements, *Life and Work* and *Faith and Order*, should be unified, and the Ecumenical Movement as such established as a permanent organisation in the form of the *World Council of the Churches*, on which all the religious bodies associated with the movement should be represented. It was further decided that the basis of church membership in the World Council should be faith in Jesus Christ as God and Saviour. Shortly before the outbreak of war in 1939 the date of the first assembly of the World Council of the Churches was fixed for August 1941. A letter was addressed to the Vatican officially informing the Holy See of the establishment of the World Council, and expressing the wish that in spite of the abstention of the Catholic Church from ecumenical meetings an unofficial exchange of views with Roman Catholic theologians might be made possible for the purpose of information and clarification. To this the Vatican replied that 'there was no obstacle

in the way of consulting confidentially the bishops and apostolic delegates'. So matters stood when in September 1939 the second World War broke out.

When normal relationships began to be resumed in the after-war years, it was decided to hold the first assembly of the World Council of the Churches at Amsterdam in 1948. The general theme chosen for discussion was 'Man's disorder and God's design'. Delegates of 151 Churches, coming from 42 countries and representing some 300 million Christians, were present. Of the Eastern Orthodox Churches, the Russians under the Patriarch of Moscow were not present, and some Protestant bodies were also unrepresented. The Catholic Church, in accordance with its consistent practice, took no part in the assembly, nor were there any unofficial Catholic observers at the deliberations.¹ This continued official aloofness did not however mean that the Vatican was not interested in, still less that it was hostile to, things ecumenical. On the Sunday before the Assembly was due to meet, the Dutch episcopate, with the undoubted approval of the Holy See, issued a Pastoral Letter to be read in all Churches, in which the position of the Catholic Church in regard to Christian unity was expounded, yet emphasis was laid on the common responsibility of Catholics and non-Catholics alike, for the disunity of Christendom, and the Ecumenical Movement was referred to as a positive contribution to its remedy. The Dutch Bishops also authorised a public Mass to be offered in every church on the following Sunday for 'the healing of schism'.

Since its establishment, the World Council of the Churches has been at pains to emphasise that the divergences of faith and order which separate Christians are vital, and that no lasting unity can be attained by minimising them, glossing them over or treating them as if they did not exist. It advocates contacts between Christians of every allegiance for discussion, in order that nothing may be left undone which could contribute to the removal of the obstacles which divide Christians. To this end, in ecumenical discussion

¹ At the Faith and Order Conference held this August at Lund in Sweden the Vicar Apostolic of Sweden appointed three priests to act as observers at its meetings. Cf. *The Tablet*, August 9.

perfect freedom must be allowed in exposition of the truth as each allegiance sees it. The World Council is plainly anxious that the Catholic Church should bear its testimony to the full in all such discussion. That any Christian body is compelled by its tenets to deny to other Christian bodies the title of Church, in a true and proper sense, is not held to be an obstacle to its membership, as the presence at it of delegates from various Eastern Orthodox Churches shows.

It is not yet certain, however, how far these positions of the World Council of Churches have determined the general direction of ecumenical thought as a whole. There are still conflicting trends within the movement. A considerable body of opinion holds, as the *Theology* reviewer appears to do, that the Catholic Church by its very nature is inimical to the ecumenical spirit and that the movement should proclaim openly its determination to go forward without consideration of the Catholic position. There are many, too, who are still averse to a slow and patient probing of theological and psychological difficulties. They wish to hurry on with practical schemes for reunion. The parties concerned in these agree to differ on points of faith and order whilst accepting a common organisation, in the hope that a deeper unity will grow from these beginnings. It is no doubt these conflicting positions that have caused the authorities of the Catholic Church hitherto to treat the Ecumenical Movement with such reserve and caution. Since the Amsterdam Conference, however, there has been a further step forward. Reserve and caution still remain; participation in ecumenical organisation is still forbidden, but Catholics have now been given encouragement to engage with non-Catholics in the technique of ecumenical relations. The terms upon which this may be done are embodied in a document of great importance: the *Instruction to local Ordinaries on the Ecumenical Movement* issued in December 1948 by the Sacred Congregation of the Holy Office. This document marks the present stage reached in the history of the relations between the Holy See and Ecumenism.

It is in effect a very full answer to the question as to how far Catholics can make use of the ecumenical method, and make contact with the Ecumenical Movement, without com-

promising the unique position of the Church. The *Instruction*, while stating very definitely that the Catholic Church as such takes no part in meetings and conferences of the ecumenical organisation, goes on to make it quite plain that the Holy See envisages the development of 'reunion' work on a wide scale within the Church. This work will be ecumenical in approach, in touch with the Ecumenical Movement among non-Catholics and alive to every development in it. By the phrase 'reunion' work it is clearly indicated in the *Instruction* that more is meant than renewed efforts at individual conversion. Individual conversion is the ultimate aim of the Church's apostolate. Every Christian must hold in some sense that the attainment of the unity which is Christ's will can only come by the conversion of others to what he himself believes to be true. In the context of the *Instruction*, however, 'reunion' work envisages an intermediate stage, in which by a corporate and personal approach on the part of the Church to other religious allegiances the ground may be prepared corporately for the work of the Holy Spirit in bringing about unity in Faith. This corporate approach must have charity and mutual understanding as its immediate objective; the conversion of individuals will follow from it as God wills it and when he wills it.

This 'reunion' work, so the *Instruction* lays down, should daily assume a more significant place within the Church's pastoral care. Catholics are urged to pray earnestly for it, and it is recommended that the faithful should be instructed in Pastoral Letters on the nature of the work and the steps being taken in each diocese to implement it. Priests and religious in particular are to be encouraged by authority to take an ardent interest in this cause, and do everything in their power by prayer and sacrifice to work for its success. The *Instruction* is insistent that it is above all the Bishops who are to make 'reunion' work the special object of their care and attention, giving it prudent encouragement and direction; safeguarding the full presentation of the Faith and protecting the faithful against the growth of a spirit of indifferentism. The cardinal temptation in ecumenical work, where the predominant motive easily becomes an overmastering desire to see unity realised among Christians, is to

emphasise agreement at the expense of difference; to allow the latter to fall into the background and thus give a view of the Faith as a whole which is ill-proportioned and distorted to the point of error. The *Instruction* warns local ordinaries to guard against this danger which has clearly been already experienced in certain unspecified countries. It is not surprising then that the first care of the Holy See is wise supervision and control by the hierarchy, in order that false hopes may not be raised by the injudicious enthusiasm of those whose hearts are liable to get the better of their heads. For this reason the direction of the movement in the future has been placed unreservedly, and in a manner which leaves no room for doubt, in the hands of the Bishops.

Local Ordinaries are given full powers for three years to promote and control, according to their discretion, various kinds of meetings on ecumenical lines. Mixed gatherings and conferences of Catholics and non-Catholic are envisaged, not only for joint action in defence of the fundamental principles of Christianity and the Natural Law, but, with due safeguards, for the promotion of 'reunion' work proper. Meetings between theologians of different allegiances may be organised for discussion and exposition of doctrine; these must be supervised with special vigilance because of the difficult nature of the work, for which only those who are competent should be chosen. Suitable priests are to be appointed in each diocese to make a special study of the Ecumenical Movement, and everything connected with it. Provision is also made in the *Instruction* for the holding of inter-diocesan, national and international conferences concerned with ecumenical work.

It is both the right and the duty of the hierarchy, so the *Instruction* insists, to take the lead in promoting this work, each ordinary in his own diocese; but groups of Bishops are recommended to combine forces for concerted action and for organisational purposes. Nothing which is an innovation on the methods of the past can be undertaken apart from the guidance, and even in a certain sense the initiative, of authority. The matter is something new, and hitherto untried on any large scale. It needs, if it is to be successful, a delicate balance; rigid adherence to essential

truth, rooted in a deep study of theology, and particularly of the history of dogma; and at the same time a fresh outlook and point of view; no longer the winning of a controversial victory, but the search for truth in common. Even the Catholic theologian, though the Church which guides him possesses the truth in its fullness, must seek to see more deeply into the truths of Faith, to see them in their wholeness and in relation to the truths held by those who are separated from us. Moreover he must seek to penetrate into and understand the idiom and way of thought which controls expression of belief in those whose background and tradition are very different from his own.

The cautious reserve in all these regulations, which is characteristic of the wisdom of the Holy See in embarking on a new and experimental policy, is the first thing to strike one on reading the *Instruction*. This no doubt explains in part the qualified approval with which it was received in ecumenical circles. A further reason for its cold reception was perhaps the extent to which all ecumenical work has been placed under episcopal authority. Fears were expressed at the time of its publication that discussion with Catholics would in future be robbed of freedom and spontaneity. But ecumenical work is liable to be fruitless unless it is conducted on a level which will be recognised as authoritative, and about that there will now be no room for doubt.

It is clear that the *Theology* reviewer was wide of the mark in asserting that Rome has tragically rejected the Ecumenical Movement. The Holy See has watched its development from the beginning to ascertain whether its principles would develop in such a way that the Catholic Church could co-operate with it. Advances have been made in a direction which renders co-operation in some degree possible. To this extent the Holy See has now taken experimental action which will open up wide possibilities if the Ecumenical Movement is true to its own principles. These involve the view that no particular doctrine of the nature of the Church, and the consequences which flow from that doctrine, can stand as an obstacle to full ecumenical collaboration.

In looking forward into the future and attempting to

forecast in thought what the essential features of a re-united Christendom would be, each religious allegiance in divided Christendom naturally believes that those essential features are to be found already existing in its own polity, spirit and outlook; in this Catholics are not singular. The key to the reunion of Christendom lies in the apprehension by all of the nature and function of the Church as our Lord designed them to be. No fruitful unity can emerge which is not grounded upon complete agreement over this. It is not possible for us to make schemes or plans for reunion, because for us the scheme already exists; it has been drawn up by our Lord. A day may come in the far future when some of the Churches which broke away from Catholic unity as a result of the Reformation will have returned to a doctrinal position which would make re-entrance into that unity feasible. The day, however, is not yet, and it is not possible to predict whether it will ever come, or if it does in what circumstances it will do so. Meanwhile to work for reunion is not to have schemes, but to do all in our power to prepare the ground for the truth, both by living the truth more fully ourselves and by relating that truth to those truths that our separated brethren are striving to live. That is the very essence and heart of true Ecumenism. The rest is God's work, and will be done in God's time and God's way.

NOTE

[The lines of action by which Catholic Ecumenical work could be applied to the religious situation in England today, and particularly the part to be played in them by the Church of England, will be discussed in a future article. In the November issue of BLACKFRIARS Fr Henry St John will consider the issues raised by the republication of Salmon's *Infallibility of the Church*.]