

THE CATHOLIC APOSTOLATE OF UNITY¹

HENRY ST JOHN, O.P.

'And I, if I be lifted up from the earth, will draw all things to myself. Now this he said, signifying what death he should die.' John 12: 32, 33.

THOSE prophetic words, spoken by our Lord shortly before his Passion, reveal to us the very heart and centre of our Catholic Faith. They were echoed by St Peter in his first sermon, on the very day of the founding of the Church, the first Pentecost: 'Therefore let all the House of Israel know most certainly that God hath made both Lord and Christ this same Jesus whom you crucified.' And a few days later proclaiming the gospel of redemption, through the death and Resurrection of Jesus of Nazareth to the Jewish people, probably within the precincts of the Temple, he summed up his message in these words: 'Neither is there any other name under heaven given amongst men whereby we must be saved.' The very foundation of the Apostolic preaching from the first was the tremendous fact that Jesus of Nazareth was the eternal Son of God, and that his bloodshedding on the Cross of Calvary had set free the whole world from the bondage of Satan, and that he had set the seal of truth on his redeeming work by his glorious Resurrection.

That is why the most conspicuous sign in every Catholic church is the sign of our redemption—the crucifix, and why the mark of every faithful follower of Jesus Christ, be he Catholic or Protestant, is a vital faith in him as God and Saviour. Yet it is one of the greatest tragedies of our anxious and troubled world that there are today millions of Christians in it, who are separated from us and from each other by what appear to be insuperable differences of belief; but about this great central dogma of our Catholic Faith, that Jesus is God and Saviour, they are firmly and even passionately convinced. And they share with us too the conviction that this same Jesus is the sole hope of our distracted world; apart from him there can be no peace and security here in this life, and no salvation, no happiness in that which is to come.

From this firm conviction has arisen, during the past forty

1 A sermon preached during the Unity Octave.

years, chiefly amongst those who are proud to call themselves Protestants, a profound sense of shame that those who love and wish to follow our Lord should be divided from each other; and from this sense of shame has grown an ever increasing longing to seek for that unity among Christians that Christ willed for his Church and prayed that his followers might always preserve. That longing has taken shape in a great movement amongst Protestants and others, in every part of Christendom, known as the Ecumenical Movement, dedicated to the search for Christian Unity. Its chief organ is an assembly known as the World Council of Churches, and its object is to promote constant and unflagging prayer for the unity of Christendom, and to organize discussion of the differences between Christians in a new spirit, a spirit of friendliness and desire to understand. Each organized Christian body, while remaining true to its own convictions and beliefs, seeks to enter into and give sympathetic understanding to the beliefs of those who differ from them, and in this way is created an atmosphere in which the truth, as it is in Christ, may be seen and understood, and thus the ground too may be prepared for the growth of unity, whose seed God alone can plant and bring to fruition, by the power of his Holy Spirit.

The latest assembly of the World Council of Churches was held at Evanston in the U.S.A. in 1954. To it came representatives of one hundred and sixty-three separate organized religious bodies or Churches. These came from forty-eight different countries in different parts of the world; they represented for the most part the Churches which sprang from the disastrous schisms of the Reformation period, though there were among them, too, members of the Orthodox Churches and other ancient Churches of the East. Let me read you some words from the message that this great assembly of World Protestantism sent out from it to the Christian World:

We affirm our faith in Jesus Christ as the hope of the World, and desire to share that faith with all men. . . . He came to us, true God and true Man, to seek and to save. Though we were the enemies of God, Christ died for us. We crucified him, but God raised him from the dead. He is risen. He has overcome the powers of sin and death. A new life has begun. And in his risen and ascended power he has sent forth into the world a new community, bound together by his Spirit, sharing his divine life and commissioned to make him known through-

out the world. He will come again as judge and king to bring all things to their consummation.

These words must go straight to the heart of every Catholic, for they re-echo the tremendous foundation truths of our own Faith. Indeed the supreme authority of the Church, in the person of the Holy Father himself, tells us that this intense desire for unity among non-Catholics, though of course it has its human motives, may nevertheless be attributed to the inspiration of the Holy Spirit and to the prayers of faithful followers of Christ everywhere. The same authority also tells us, in the great encyclical *Mystici Corporis* of Pope Pius XII, that all non-Catholics, though separated from the visible structure of the Church, Christ's Mystical Body, may yet be related by good will and desire to Christ in his Church, and so may have some share in the life of grace of which he is the source.

But in spite of the interest taken by the Holy See in the Ecumenical Movement, the Catholic Church is a notable absentee from Ecumenical organizations and assemblies, not excluding that of the World Council of Churches itself. For this we are often criticized by non-Catholics as arrogant and uncharitable. But every Catholic will understand that this is not due to pride or lack of love. The reason for it is that the fundamental position of the World Council of Churches, in its language and in the assumptions upon which its work is conducted, is utterly opposed to the fundamental position of the Catholic Church. The World Council holds that though Christ created his Church in the beginning with a visible structural unity, that unity has in the course of history been split, by the sin of man, into a hundred parts. Those parts are each, it is claimed, in its way members of the Church, so that the Church, though united in Christ and his redeeming grace, now possesses no visible structural unity; that unity lies in the future, in the coming great Church. The Catholic Church on the other hand is supremely conscious that, from the day of Pentecost, when it came into existence by the power of the Holy Spirit, Christ has given to his Church a visible structural unity which cannot be broken—it is by God's providence indestructible, in order that through its unity the life of Christ in his Mystical Body may be preserved and manifested to the world as a single organic whole. This structural visible unity is secured under the power of the Holy Spirit by an authoritative hierarchy,

the Bishops, successors of the Apostles, set to rule the Church of God all over the world. The unity of this hierarchy is secured by the fact that our Lord appointed St Peter and his successors as the Heads of his Church on earth, to rule the whole Church with supreme authority under him. The Holy See, the Chair of St Peter, and his successors, is the centre and keystone upon which that structural unity depends. To be in communion with the Holy See is to be a Catholic, a member of the true Church; to be separated from that centre of unity is to be outside the Church's visible structural unity.

During the course of history schisms have taken place, brought about by human sin and selfishness, and those schisms have always been a cutting off of a portion of the Church from the unity of the Body. Catholics do not deny that the sin which caused the schism and maintained it was often, in part at least, on the side of those who remained within the Church, and that the sin sometimes reached to the very highest authorities in the Church. Nevertheless, the divinely constituted indestructible unity has always been maintained by God's overruling providence and always will be. *The gates of hell shall never prevail against it.*

It is then our Catholic Faith that the Church of God alone speaks in the world with a single united voice and with the fullness of Christ's authority. Christian bodies in separation from it are human organizations with only a human authority. We do not deny that they do much good and contain much of the truth: they possess the inspired Scriptures, the Word of God; but the Scriptures have only human interpreters, and their interpretations are liable to error and in fact contain much that is erroneous. This then is the unique claim of the Catholic Church—that it alone possesses Christ's authority to speak his Word. To enter an assembly such as the World Council of Churches would be to abrogate this unique claim, for it would be to consent to sit as an equal among equals with other Churches in the search for a future unity, when it is supremely conscious that it alone now and always possesses a God-given unity, and that others can only attain that unity by being drawn into its already existing structure by the grace of God, by the power of the Holy Ghost.

Yet the refusal to participate officially in the ecumenical search for unity does not mean that the Holy See is indifferent to that search. From the beginning it has watched the progress of

Ecumenism with interest and increasing sympathy. At first the predominant tendency in the movement was to lay the chief emphasis upon goodwill and collaboration between separated Churches as a means of attaining unity, relegating agreement in belief, apart from the central doctrines of the Incarnation and the Atonement, to a secondary place. But after a time a different tendency began to assert itself and has now reached an almost predominant position; the tendency to place primary emphasis upon the necessity for agreement in faith as a foundation for true unity. The growth of this tendency has greatly increased the interest and sympathy of the Holy See, so that seven years ago an instruction of the Holy Office was issued to all the Bishops of the Catholic Church on the Ecumenical Movement, encouraging them to study its methods and promote, with due safeguards, a new approach to non-Catholics, with the object of creating a friendly atmosphere in which the differences which divide the Catholic Church from non-Catholics could be explored to their roots in history and theology. In this way the ground could be prepared in which the seeds of unity could germinate and fructify by God's grace. Permission is given in this Instruction for the holding of conferences between Catholics and non-Catholics, under the authority of each Bishop in his own diocese, to discuss divergence of belief in an ecumenical spirit, and in particular for conferences of theologians on either side, to do this at the highest level.

But above all the Holy See is insistent on the paramount necessity of prayer. That is why the Octave of prayer for unity is kept with considerable solemnity in the great Metropolitan Cathedral of Westminster. For some years past it has been kept in Rome, where the Holy Father himself has said Mass on each day for its intentions; and it is greatly hoped that, encouraged by these examples, every cathedral, parish church, religious house and convent through the length and breadth of Britain will soon be keeping it. For never has the need for Christian unity been greater.

We are surrounded by a growing materialism of life and outlook. The standards by which human life is judged are increasingly materialistic. On the whole this materialism is not hostile to religion; it is part bewildered by the puzzle of human life and part indifferent to everything but the problem of day-to-day

living. But spiritual realities, belief in God as Creator, and in consequence in discharging our obligations to him, who has made us for eternal life; the nature of sin and our desperate need of redemption—these things are less and less under men's eyes. And all the while an active materialist group, hostile to religion, is working quietly and efficiently to exploit men's bewilderment and indifference in the determination to keep their eyes from straying beyond the boundaries of this life to those values and standards of judgment that have their origin there. Meanwhile the Church of God proclaims in clear and insistent tones the gospel of redemption by the Cross of Christ, and the way, God's way, in which that redemption is made available to men: the way of prayer and penance, of Mass and sacramental grace. But so often the common man has little chance of hearing the voice of the Church, and if he hears it he disregards it because it is drowned by a chorus of discordant voices, the voices of divided Christendom, each claiming to speak in the name of Christ, each claiming to teach his truth, and each declaring that its way is his way, and all saying different things. Is it surprising that the common man so often turns away from the task of finding out whether Christianity is the true solution to the problem of life, and gives it up as a bad job?

Well, perhaps you will be saying to yourself: I see all this, but what can I do—a layman unskilled in the theological differences that divide Christians? There are two things that every Catholic man and woman can do every day of their lives. One is a labour of love; the other a labour of prayer. The labour of love is always to remember that all non-Catholic Christians are our brethren because, although separated outwardly from Christ, they can be united by grace to Christ in his Church. We call them separated brethren in the Benediction prayer, though the emphasis is generally so much on the separated that we forget altogether about the brethren. And because they are our brethren we must have the greatest respect for their consciences. They conscientiously believe they are doing right in serving God within the Christian bodies in which they find themselves. And they are doing right until God by his grace changes their consciences. For this reason too we must learn to respect their loyalty and sometimes deep devotion to their respective allegiances. And above all there must be no contempt or ridicule for their beliefs

and practices, however strange and inadequate they may seem to us, because they so often misunderstand the Catholic beliefs and practices we ourselves hold dear. Terrible harm has been and is done by gibes and derision for the sincere convictions of others. If every Catholic man and woman would resolve from today never again to deride or ridicule the sincere religious convictions of non-Catholics, the atmosphere of hostility that divides us would quickly disappear; and at least one step forward would have been taken towards Christian unity.

And the other labour is a labour of prayer. We all know, in theory at least, that of all the forces that shape men's lives and change them prayer is the most powerful; more powerful than politics or planning or the force of war. If Christian unity comes to save our civilization, it will come because of the power of prayer. Our Lady has pointed the way at Lourdes and again it would seem at Fatima. Resolve then to pray. Not simply once a year during this Octave but every day, at your morning and night prayers, add the prayer for Christian unity. Go further and resolve at Mass Sunday by Sunday to say in the Mass with the priest the prayer which he says just before his Holy Communion for the unity of Christians. And perhaps you can do even more than that. Resolve to hear Mass once more often than you usually do and for this particular intention. If you cannot possibly go to Mass in the week, make a visit to the Blessed Sacrament; join together with a few friends to do this regularly—others will join you, the practice will spread, and in time a great power of prayer will rise up from Catholic men and women in England. If that were to happen, the reunion of all Christians in the one true Church would not seem to be so visionary an affair as it does today. Then perhaps more and more of our countrymen would be drawn by prayer and grace into the unity of Christ's Church; and because of that unity her single decisive voice would be clearly heard proclaiming that there is no other name under heaven given to men whereby we must be saved; and men and women of good will on every side would be attracted by the power of Christ crucified—'I, if I be lifted up will draw all men to myself (And this he said signifying what death he should die)'. We adore thee, O Christ, and we bless thee because by thy Holy Cross thou hast redeemed the world.