

THE APPROACH TO REUNION¹

I

THE new regroupings of the future are forming themselves round two clearly defined rallying points. One of these is materialism, which attracts those who have ceased to fix their eyes on a life beyond this life. The other is Christianity, towards which are gravitating those who cannot be satisfied with a materialistic explanation of the world, and who believe that in, and around, and beyond its life lies another and more perfect life, in which we are in some way sharers. The materialist grouping is as yet only a nucleus, but it has a coherent creed, a crusading spirit and definite unity of aim. In strong contrast with this small, active, homogeneous nucleus, steadily extending its circle of influence, is the huge army of Christendom, full of supernatural vitality and heroic effort, but handicapped by internal dissension, reduced sometimes almost to impotence; and unable to move forward in strength and unity on its mission to convert the world to Christ.

Is it any wonder that there is an increasing number of men and women in every one of the many sections into which Christendom is divided, who are turning their thoughts more and more to the problem of reunion? They see that to remain as we are, divided and crippled in our efforts, is not merely to court the disaster of being overwhelmed by the forces of pagan materialism, but is a betrayal of our Blessed Lord's commission, who has bidden us go and teach all nations, not go bewilder them with the multiplicity of our doctrines and the conflict of our many opinions.

Many of us regard reunion as the most primary and vital of all the problems that Christianity must attempt to solve in the near future. And yet we are well aware of the complications of the problem and its many difficulties. Each of

¹ The substance of a paper read to the Reunion Society, Oxford, November 26th, 1934.

us regards as fundamental to Christianity some part of the special contribution which his own section of Christendom makes to the whole, because he believes that that part was designed by our Lord to be an essential element in the religion which He founded. If we are sincere Christians we know that we cannot give way, by a fraction of an inch, upon those things which we believe to have been sanctioned as necessary in Christ's intention. Any disunion among Christians will result, in some sense, in a corporate betrayal of our Lord's commission to teach the truth to all nations, but it would be a far worse betrayal of Him to sacrifice, in the interests of an artificial unity, any truth which we believe Him to have committed to the care of His Church.

The path of those, then, who would pursue the cause of the reunion of Christendom is beset by difficulties. These can only be overcome by our blessed Lord Himself, in the measure in which we allow Him by the power of His Spirit to enlighten our minds and fire our wills; till our minds begin to see the situation as He sees it and our wills begin to burn with the love that fires His Will.

The chief obstacles, apart from our individual sinfulness, which prevent Him from bringing our minds and wills into conformity with His own are the prejudices, the misunderstandings, the inherited traditions, which are integral to our surroundings and the atmosphere in which we pass our lives. These things often generate a corporate pride and even arrogance, which hinder the work of God's grace, and are very hard for us to break through. We shall only do so by a firm determination to get outside our normal surroundings and make contacts of sympathy and understanding with those whose environment is very different from our own. Then we shall begin to understand what they hold so dear and prize so highly, and why they hold it with such firm conviction; what they view with fear and suspicion, and why they shrink from it instinctively; and the knowledge so gained will generate in us sympathy, understanding and generally respect. On this groundwork in the hearts of men the power of the Holy Ghost can work,

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and where such material is found He will cause the truth to emerge from the chaos of conflicting opinion so that all may see and accept it. It is in this spirit and with these presuppositions that I should like to envisage the subject.²

For Roman Catholics there can be no ultimate disagreement as to what is of faith, and no hesitation in holding with our whole heart and mind what has been defined as of faith by the Church. But defined dogmas come naturally to be applied by fallible minds to the infinitely varying circumstances of human life, and in that application there may arise deep and far-reaching differences of outlook, method, and approach. It is both natural and inevitable that this should be. The apprehension of truth by single human minds, or groups of minds, is often likely to be partial, and its application to particular problems one-sided and unbalanced in emphasis. It will be obvious, then, that among Roman Catholics, though there is necessarily unanimity in regard to the truths of faith, there are deeply rooted differences of idea as to how the problems which arise from the application of dogma to life should be approached. In treating, therefore, of the subject of reunion my fundamental principle will be the defined doctrine of the Roman Catholic Church, but my approach to the problem, which is my application of this doctrine to present day circumstances in England, is my own.

The problem is far less one of sheer dogma than we are sometimes inclined to think. True, the dogmas about which we differ are there, clear cut and uncompromising, though for many Anglicans the Oxford Movement has reduced them in number, in some cases almost to vanishing point.

² In order to avoid all misunderstandings, may I say here that to a meeting such as that of the Reunion Society, where not all are of the same religious allegiance, I used for convenience the terminology which is ordinarily adopted amongst Englishmen. I speak of bishops and priests, Anglo-Catholics and Roman Catholics, the Church of England and the Church of Rome, without inverted commas, and entirely without prejudice to the various convictions in the many controversies which centre round the realities that these words represent.

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But the controversy about them has divided us for nearly four centuries into two opposing camps, and for nearly four centuries we have been steadily growing apart, each developing our own distinctive ethos and atmosphere, our own peculiar misconceptions and misjudgements of the others' ideas and motives, and now as corporate societies we face each other, hostile and suspicious, while the forces of materialism gather strength.

The first thing that must be done in our work for reunion is to break down and clear away the barriers of mutual suspicion and prejudice which divide us, and those barriers can only be broken down by the more complete understanding of each other which comes from personal contacts. When these contacts have been established we shall still be divided on fundamental questions of dogma, but we shall have created between ourselves a disposition of heart, a true friendship and an understanding of each other's point of view; a congenial groundwork upon which the Holy Spirit can work. This is the essential preliminary to any talk of reunion, and without it we cannot even approach the problem.

II

I believe that the greatest obstacle to such an approach is the widespread feeling that Roman Catholics tend to minimize or deny the workings of divine grace in Anglicans. This feeling may be summarized in the words of a responsible writer,² who describes as the way of absorption what he calls the ordinary Roman attitude to reunion. 'The Way of Absorption is a false way,' he says, 'because it implies that the truth of Christianity lies entirely on one side, and involves a denial that the Holy Spirit has taught the other side anything worth having.'

Now it is Catholic dogma that grace and truth come to us through Jesus Christ by the working of the Holy Spirit,

² *Intercommunion*, by A. G. Hebert, S.S.M., Ch. ix, p. 121.

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and it is also Catholic dogma that those who are baptized (whether in fact or by desire) are incorporated into the mystical Body of Christ and made His members by sanctifying grace. The only thing that can cut off a baptized person from the sanctifying grace which unites him to our blessed Lord is mortal sin. Unless, then, a Roman Catholic has the right, and he can have no such right, to say of an Anglican, 'He is in mortal sin,' he has no sort of business to minimize the extent or deny the existence in him of sanctifying grace. And since the possession of sanctifying grace implies the presence of the virtues, and the gifts of the Holy Ghost, it follows that whatever truth an Anglican holds by divine faith has been taught him by the Holy Ghost, and if he has learned that truth through the Church of England, then the Holy Ghost has made the Church of England His instrument for teaching it.

We believe that in the confusion and upheaval of doctrine which accompanied the Reformation the apostolic succession in the Church of England was broken, and that in consequence (apart from Baptism and Marriage) the sacraments of the Church of England are not vehicles of sacramental grace. But though *we* are bound to the sacraments, God Himself is not, and we have no warrant for saying that Almighty God does not reward the faith and devotion of those who use these ordinances by granting the graces for which they ask Him, and which they believe to be conveyed by them. Such graces would not, of course, be sacramental—in the sense that they would not be conveyed through the sacraments. So far, then, from denying or minimizing the spiritual life of Anglicans, a Roman Catholic must acknowledge that both it and the objective grace which causes it may be as deep and full as his own. The difference between us lies chiefly in this; that many Anglicans tend to regard experience as the guarantee of the validity of sacraments and of grace received; it has become for them an ultimate criterion, while for us though it is recognized as evidence in its own limited sphere, it is not wholly reliable evidence, unless supported and authenticated by the external authority of the Church.

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It is an essential part of our faith that Our Lord founded a visible Church—a society, kingdom or body, which should remain through the ages organically one, in this sense; that as a society, or kingdom, or living organism cannot be divided and yet retain its identity, so the Church must always remain indivisible; portions may be rent away by schism, but its unity remains unimpaired though its life may be terribly weakened. This visible organic unity, so we believe, was our Lord's plan for His Church because He knew it to be the only way by which His truth and grace could be preserved and the means of their propagation guaranteed.

But the visible Church is only a part of the mystical Body of Christ, and the mystical Body of Christ is far wider in its extension than the visible Church. We believe that those who are separated from the unity of the visible Church, for any reason short of mortal sin, are nevertheless united by grace to the mystical Body of Christ, and are our brethren because like us they have been made sons of God through Him.

A second and equally formidable obstacle stands in the way of an understanding friendship between Anglicans and Roman Catholics in this country. It lies in our past history. No candid student of the Reformation can view the evolution of events during that period of chaos without a feeling of profound sorrow for the sins and lost opportunities of the past. Europe was surging with new ideas and new life, the waves of which swept to meet the solid land of traditional Christendom; a land once fertile but now so hard and dry as to resist, until too late, the forming on its surface of inlets and channels to carry off the flood, and irrigate its parched and withered vegetation.

The new ideas came when the Church was ill prepared to receive and assimilate them. The Papacy, weakened in men's eyes by the long scandal of the Babylonish captivity and the great schism, was so occupied with diplomacy and intrigue that it was in danger of being regarded more as one of the rival powers of Europe than as the spiritual centre of Christendom. The Popes themselves, sometimes

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chosen with an eye to their capacity for political rather than for spiritual rule, were not the leaders who could or would initiate a drastic reform in head and members. There was widespread scandal and corruption in the highest ecclesiastical places, and men began to ask themselves whether an authority which tolerated and sometimes actively exploited perversions of truth and justice so gross could indeed be of God. Meanwhile, the intellectual life of the Church was at a low ebb, and what was worse, true spirituality had declined, giving place to a formalism which emphasized external works at the expense of interior sanctification and was content to allow men's souls to starve through being unfed by the Body and Blood of Christ in Holy Communion.

Was it much wonder that the wave of new ideas finding its progress blocked and no sufficient channels in which to flow swelled to a great flood, tearing up and destroying as it went? At the back of the reforming movement lay much that was sound and good. Apart from the desire for the abolition of the more obvious abuses connected with simony and other forms of spiritual traffic, and certain undoubted superstitions, anxiety was shown for a more real sharing by the laity in the life of grace. This expressed itself in the wish for the restoration of frequent Communion, for liturgical reform, and for re-emphasis on congregational worship, but a sense of impotence in the face of entrenched abuses drove people into the position of rebels against authority, and, the momentum of their minds gathering speed, they ended by becoming destroyers rather than renovators of the riches of Catholic truth.

Out of the chaos of conflicting movements emerged the Church of England, strongly national in sentiment, closely bound up with the State, altered almost beyond recognition, though preserving some elements of its pre-reformation past; but now no longer a component part of a united Christendom, but a new and independent entity. It was a dominant and persecuting body, or at least a body so closely identified with the persecuting State that the functions of the two were scarcely distinguishable (I am stating

facts, not discussing values); and the fullest force of its repressive zeal fell upon the little group who still remained actively faithful in their allegiance to the Holy See. For two hundred and fifty years this little group was a harried, repressed, and dwindling minority which kept the faith with heroic fortitude, cut off from any part in the education and the rich cultural life that was flourishing around them. From that group the Roman Catholic Church in England to-day is descended, and we are only now beginning to recover from the famine of the lean years of persecution; but as a body we are saturated with the glorious traditions of our Catholic forefathers and of our martyrs who suffered death for the Faith.

But these traditions of the past, glorious in themselves, undoubtedly do blind us to the fact that the disasters of the Reformation were due, largely at any rate, to worldliness and neglect of duty in high quarters, to supine toleration of abuse and corruption and to acquiescence on the part of authority in a very low standard of spirituality; to the sins in short of Catholics themselves. We sometimes adopt an attitude of arrogance as if the fault were all on the other side, whereas we should be the first to confess our share of the blame for the divisions and woes of Christendom. At the same time, Anglicans must exercise a wide charity, remembering that the memory of centuries of persecution is not easily blotted out. We stand on the threshold of a new and changing world, and we must look steadily forward to the unity of the future, not backward to the divisions and bitterness of the past; if we do this the obstacles from our past history which stand in the way of mutual understanding will gradually melt away.

A third obstacle to understanding friendship is what is generally called Rome's exclusiveness. Let me quote once again the words of Fr. Hebert.⁴ 'The Roman Church is catholic in the richness of her spiritual treasures in a liturgical, devotional and theological tradition which sums up the life of the Christian centuries; the note of universality

⁴ *Op. cit.*, Ch. vii, pp. 96-97.

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is writ large over her thought and her life. Yet in her exclusive claim to be Catholic she is not Catholic but the most denominational of all denominations in so far as the claim of the infallible authority of the Pope is used as an instrument of exclusiveness in order to prove all other Christians to be in the wrong.' And again, 'Catholicity in the true sense belongs to the Holy Spirit; and it is impossible to accept the Roman claim in the form in which it is commonly presented by its apologists in England without denying the reality of the work of the Holy Spirit in the rest of Christendom.'

The Roman claim must necessarily be fundamentally the same in whatever country it is put forward; if its method of presentation differs in England from its method of presentation elsewhere the difference is not one of principle, but of the application of a principle. I have tried to show earlier in this paper that no Roman Catholic can safely deny the reality of the work of the Holy Spirit in the rest of Christendom except by asserting that all Christians outside the obedience of Rome are in a state of mortal sin.

Let me, however, set in contrast to this charge against the Church of Rome of a special exclusiveness some words of another Anglican, Dr. Parsons, the Bishop of Southwark. I quote from the *Church Times*.⁶ The Bishop was speaking to a group of Baptists on the subject of reunion between Anglicans and Nonconformists.

'What their forefathers believed to be really important principles,' he said, 'led them to break away from the communion and fellowship of the Church of England; our forefathers could not accept those principles, neither can we, and so we remain divided. There is a state of schism between us.'

Dr. Parsons then went on to explain what Anglicans have in mind when they talk of reunion.

'By reunion we Anglicans mean something very much more difficult to attain than a mutual recognition and acceptance by various denominations of each other's varying beliefs, ordin-

⁶ October 5th, 1934.

ances, ministries and ways of worship, as sufficient. We believe in one Body as well as one Spirit, our consciences can be satisfied with nothing less than the bringing together into one communion and fellowship, constituted by common standards of faith, common sacraments, and a common ministry, as a unity, corporate, organic, and visible, in which each part depends on the whole, all those denominations now organised independently of each other. But independency is one of the basic principles which distinguish the group of denominations to which you Baptists belong, and so long as it remains so your ideal of Christian unity must remain fundamentally different from ours.'

It would, I think, be hard to say better what the Bishop has said here. Substitute the words *Church of Rome* for *Church of England*, and *Church of England* for *Baptist denomination*, and the words *independence of Rome* for *independency*, and the principles of unity he lays down as between the Church of England and the Baptists exactly fit the situation as between the Church of Rome and the Church of England. Dr. Parsons goes on to say:

'the Church of England believes that the authority of its ministry to teach and guide and rule is derived from that which Our Saviour committed to His apostles. This derivation depends partly on the inward conviction of all who are admitted to a share in that ministry that they are truly called to it by the Holy Ghost; partly on a commission given by those who have received authority to ordain. As a matter of historical fact, I believe that the institution through which that authority has been maintained from the first days until now is the episcopate. You Baptists have deliberately and conscientiously rejected episcopacy. The historic episcopate has often been grievously misused and misrepresented by unworthy bishops, but that does not alter the fact that it has always safeguarded the principle of the corporate solidity of the Church as a whole.

Again substitute *Roman Catholic Church* for *Church of England* and *Anglican* for *Baptist* and the phrase *episcopate in communion with the See of Rome* for *episcopate* and the words of Dr. Parsons exactly describe the Roman Catholic attitude towards reunion; save that we should not make the authority of the episcopate immediately dependent on the inward conviction of a call by the Holy Ghost. The truth is that Rome is no more exclusive than Canterbury.

Any Christian body which holds firmly that certain dogmas and institutions are fundamental to Christianity as being part of our Lord's will must necessarily be exclusive with regard to other Christian bodies which have lost those dogmas and institutions or treat them as unessential. Exclusiveness in this sense, and it is the only sense in which a spirit of exclusiveness is legitimate, is not incompatible with charity, but is an expression of it; for the highest expression of charity is to do the Will of God. The fact that a doctrine of the unity and authority of the Church excludes greater *numbers* from the unity of the visible Church does not really make a Church which holds that doctrine more essentially exclusive. When this truth is fully and frankly recognized by both sides the obstacle to an understanding friendship which comes from the accusation of exclusiveness will disappear.

May I end with a suggestion? I should like to see growing up at a number of centres all over England small informal groups of Anglicans and Roman Catholics meeting together to discuss the problem of reunion, not in a spirit of controversy, but in a spirit of frank and free statement of conviction such as characterized the Malines conversations. Roman Catholics and Anglicans would then begin to be drawn together, not simply as people who get on well in social intercourse, but as friends who understand and can realize with sympathy each other's deepest convictions. Such friendship would generate an intense desire for reunion, and when this desire germinates and grows surely the powerful working of the Holy Ghost will find in it material upon which he can operate, and reunion will become an accomplished fact. To me the deep and loving friendship between two saintly men—Cardinal Mercier and Lord Halifax—is the type of a friendship which ought to exist between Roman Catholics in this country and members of the Church of England. When that friendship does become actual the day will not be far off when the Church of England will be not absorbed by, but gathered into (you must allow me to end on a controversial note) the unity of the visible Church.

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