

writers for and readers of *THE LIFE OF THE SPIRIT* for their kindness to him during his two and a half years of editorship, and to recommend to them his successor, Fr Edmund Hill, O.P., whose name will be by no means unfamiliar to them.



THE CHURCH UNITY OCTAVE

VICTOR WHITE, O.P.

The Substance of an Address given at Cambridge in 1957

IT cannot be emphasized too strongly that this is an octave of prayer for unity. A time, therefore, not so much for talking and listening to each other about our divisions and how we might heal them, but rather for talking and listening to God—trying to see our divisions with *his* eyes, and asking for *his* unity.

This octave—or eight days—of prayer for unity all began about fifty years ago at a place called Graymoor in the State of New York. A small community of very Catholic-minded clergymen of the American Episcopal Church lived there, trying to follow the rule and way of life of St Francis. They called themselves—they are still called—Friars of the Atonement. They were not, so far as I know, very distinguished theologians or what we should regard as abnormally saintly men; just sincere, hard-headed and hard-working American pastors living a community life. But they were disturbed men, who were genuinely concerned about the curious position in which they found themselves—even though that position was no fault or making of their own. For here they were, very Catholic-minded, yet belonging to a denomination which was not recognized to be Catholic by most Catholics. Here they were, trying to follow St Francis, yet out of communion with the Church of St Francis and with the Church authorities to whom St Francis had been so devoted and obedient.

But I suspect that there must have been something still deeper and more serious that was disturbing them, and which induced them to start and propagate this octave of prayer. For, as we have seen, they called themselves Friars or Brothers of the Atonement. That meant that they were especially dedicated to what the Lord Jesus did on the Cross. And what he did on the Cross was a work of atoning, of 'at-one-ing', of reuniting men with God and among

themselves. 'God was in Christ reconciling the world to himself' (2 Cor. v, 19). In and by Jesus Christ the Son, we who were sinners and separated from God—and from one another—were enabled to become sons of the Father and brothers to each other in the power of the Spirit. The atoning work of the Lord was to unite us in the very unity of the Godhead itself.

This reunion of man with God, in the very unity of God, brought with it a new principle of unity among men: not just a man-made unity, but a God-made unity, a work of the God-Man Jesus Christ. In the beginning, as St Paul told the Athenians, 'God made one all mankind to dwell upon the whole face of the earth . . . that they should seek God, if haply they may feel after him or find him'. (Acts xvii, 26f.) But man had lost his original unity with God, and so become self-centred instead of God-centred—and hence divided into countless peoples, tribes, religions, deceived and deceiving, hating one another, killing one another. True, there was a chosen people: a people who were to learn slowly how self-centredness could be overcome by faith, prayer and sacrifice, and so God could be their centre of unity again. But still it was only one, small and constantly backsliding people; not a world-wide, universal congregation or church for *all* men. They, by God's grace, prepared and foreshadowed the situation in which God in Christ could come and perform his at-one-ing work. They did not, and could not, achieve it.

But let us go back to Graymoor. We may suppose that the members of that little community were very troubled indeed when they saw that, notwithstanding Christ's atoning work, not only was mankind still divided, but that the very members of his atoning body were too. Those, that is to say, who had been reborn by baptism and become his members, and who acknowledged him as Lord, were themselves separated into 'denominations', instead of being united openly in one universal Church. As they beheld the terrible sight of divided Christendom, and their own place within it, they must have known that it was something which *they* could not put right. For the unity which Jesus had made and for which he had prayed was not any sort of unity which could be patched up by human efforts. It was the very unity of the Trinity communicated to men: 'I pray that they may be one, as thou Father in me and I in thee; that they also may be one in us'. (John xvii, 21.) The Church, the unity of the Church,

was God's making, Christ's making; and could never be something they themselves could make. It could never come from human devising, planning, discussions, negotiations. Whatever unity could be achieved that way would not be the unity of the Church of Christ. 'Other foundation no man can lay than that which is laid, which is Jesus Christ.' (1 Cor. iii, 11.)

Since it must be God's work, Christ's work, it had to be put into *his* hands, and be a doing of *his* will. And that meant that, so far as we are concerned, it must be a work of prayer: prayer that God would do what we are unable to do and he alone can do. And prayer that we would not stand in the way of Christ's atoning work and intentions, but would have the light, the grace, the humility and the strength to co-operate with them.

So these Friars of the Atonement set about to pray, and persuade others, especially their fellow Anglicans, to pray with them. Not, of course, only during one week of the year, but constantly. But these eight days each year, they suggested, might be specially devoted to the purpose.

Why these particular days—January 18th to 25th?

January 18th has been known in many lands and for many centuries by the rather strange name of 'St Peter's Chair Day'. It is a minor feast of St Peter, which has long been celebrated to commemorate his making his home, his headquarters, in Rome. Simon Peter, the first of the apostles, was the first to acknowledge that the Son of Man was the Son of God, the Messiah. To his, 'Thou art the Christ, the Son of the living God', Jesus had replied, 'Thou art Petros, and on this *petra* (or Rock) I will build my Church'. (Matt. xvi, 18.) Perhaps the little Graymoor community was not yet quite clear what all that might imply. But one thing anyway was clear. The Lord had said, 'I will build *my* Church': not, '*you* will build my Church'; nor, '*you* will build *your* Church'; still less, '*you* will build *your churches*'. So once again it was clear that what was needed was prayer. The Church, the oneness of the Church, was something that only God and his Christ could build, and from him only must it be sought.

January 25th was already in their own Anglican (as well as in the Roman) calendar the commemoration of the Conversion of St Paul: one of the most momentous events in the history of the world. The day when Saul of Tarsus was turned into Paul, apostle of the nations, has had incalculable consequences for history ever

since. For on that day this man Saul, breathing hatred and slaughter for the little band of followers of Jesus of Nazareth, was thrown from his high horse on the way to Damascus. The voice came to him, 'Why dost thou persecute me?' And he answered with the question, 'What wilt thou have me to do?'. What the Lord had for him to do was to turn that little band of Jews into a worldwide Catholic Church, in fact as well as theory. And we know how Saul turned Paul, like Simon turned Peter, was to end his days and shed his blood for Christ in that same city of Rome—the capital and centre of the world in those days.

A few years after they had started this octave—in 1909—the community at Graymoor found the answer, so far as they themselves were concerned, to their prayer for unity. And they found it in communion with that See of Peter in Rome. But they did not stop praying, and there was still plenty to pray for. Christendom was still divided, whatever solution they personally had found. They had promoted the Unity Octave in the Anglican communion where it grew and spread, but they also took it with them. And then a rather surprising thing happened. This Anglican-born observance was taken up by Roman Catholics, and in comparatively few years spread throughout the whole Roman Catholic Church. Before very long it was encouraged by several bishops and then by the Pope himself. Every year the Pope takes part in it, and has blessed and encouraged it in many ways.

Then, in the years between the two world wars, came the Abbé Paul Couturier; and it is to this good French priest that we owe the spread of this observance, and especially outside the Roman Catholic Church. The idea seems to be being put around that the Abbé started another, a quite different, week of prayer, almost in opposition to the original one. So far as I have understood him, nothing could have been further from his wishes or intentions. True, he preferred the word 'week' (*semaine*) to the rather sacristy word, 'octave'; but we should not hold that against him. True, he knew that other Christians could not use the same forms of prayer that some of his own Roman Catholic co-religionists were using. He was so ardent an apostle of unity, that he would surely have detested the idea of splitting united prayer for unity itself into two rival observances. Had he wished to start another observance (and I can find no evidence at all for such a wish), he would surely not have chosen the very same days.

But the Abbé did say something very important about it which, though obvious enough, had not been said clearly before. He said, in effect: 'Let us *all* pray for unity at this one and the same time; *all* of us who acknowledge Christ as our Lord, whatever our traditions and denominations may be. You do not have to have the same worries or beliefs as those Friars of the Atonement; you don't have to hold with the Pope or with what the Pope holds in order to pray for unity. Do not leave it all to us R.C.s. We are *all* concerned in this; and we *all* should become aware of the crime of our divisions, and seek that God's will may be done in this matter. We must *all* seek that, and only that, whether we be R.C. or C. of E. or Orthodox or Methodist or Baptist—or whatever we may be. And that is something we can and must do without any disloyalty to our different traditions, and indeed in full loyalty to them, for all of them teach us to pray, "Not my will, but thine, be done". We can and must pray for this without first changing our allegiance, but also without prejudice to what God's answer may be. And it is *his* answer that matters: "*Thy* will be done"; "What wilt *thou* have me to do?"'

So this is a time of prayer to God for unity. Discussion among ourselves, meetings, forums about unity can, of course, be much more interesting—and perhaps much easier. But in those we shall never find the answer. But prayer—putting the problem before God, recognizing our perplexity, our impotence, our guilt; asking his light, his guidance, his will and his strength to accomplish it—that will assuredly be answered, though possibly in surprising and disagreeable ways.

So, although I am billed to talk about 'Catholicism and Unity' I have preferred to talk about 'Prayer for Unity'. But there is one thing I must say about the Roman Catholic position; not to argue about the matter, but just to give you some idea about how urgent is this need for prayer, how serious are our divisions.

There is, thank God, much about which all of us here are agreed; more still about which some of us are agreed. But there is, as you know, one fundamental point which distinguishes us Roman Catholics from most other Christians. We believe quite simply that one only Catholic and Apostolic Church, visibly united as one body, made by Christ to continue his atoning work and teaching, is not only something that certainly *did* exist, and which we hope and pray *will* exist, but which also *does* exist here

and now. And when I say we *believe* it, I do not mean that we just *think* it, or merely *know* it as a conclusion of theological or historical research—still less do I mean that we necessarily like it. But I mean that it is part and parcel of our faith in Jesus Christ—in what he is and said, did and still does. I do not intend to argue about that now. I only want to state that this is an essential part of our faith, and we cannot deny it without denying our faith and our Lord. We cannot believe that any amount of human stupidity or weakness, any number of schisms, any impoverishment of numbers or even of the worthiness of the members of the visible Church which Christ started, can ever destroy it—however terribly and cruelly it wounds it. Nor can any of these things make his promises ineffective or annihilate that visible body which he started, and which we find in the Acts continuing what he ‘began to do and teach’ in the Gospels. We believe that though Christians may be divided, the visible Church which Jesus built never can be. Our faith in Jesus and in his Church is one and the same faith, and we Roman Catholics believe that we may on no account betray it without betraying our Lord and Master.

This being our faith, we believe it our task to bear witness to it in divided Christendom, whatever the cost; even though we are often aware that, in other respects, many of us are very poor witness-bearers to the Christ-life, and that many who are separated from us seem more Christlike than many among ourselves. There can be no ‘holier than thou’ attitude towards Church unity among *any* of us. But, believing these things, we Roman Catholics believe that we must pray, and that yet at the same time we have to say No to many of the other enterprises for reunion around us. We believe that the unity of the Church, and her visible unity as a single corporate body of men, is something given, Christ-made, still and always existing. So we have to say No, however regretfully, to anything which might suggest otherwise, and which is inspired, however sincerely, by different beliefs. We cannot ourselves participate in anything which seeks to *make* a united Church, for our faith assures us that it is already made, and by the Lord himself. Nor can we participate in anything, such as ‘united services’, which would imply that our divisions do not matter, or that we are able to be united in any body other than that which the Lord himself has made and appointed. We are thankful that this is becoming better understood among our separated brethren.

This is so especially among those who are, in other respects, the most opposed to us, at the 'extreme left' of Protestantism. Karl Barth states what is also our position when he writes:

There is no way of escape from the visible to the invisible Church. . . . If there is a problem here which asks for solution—and indeed there is—it is one which concerns the invisible as directly as it concerns the visible Church; if we hearken to Christ we shall be sure of that. . . . We have no right to explain the multiplicity of the Churches at all. We have to deal with it as we deal with sin, our own and others, to recognize it as a fact, to understand it as the impossible thing which has intruded itself, as guilt which we must take upon ourselves, without the power to liberate ourselves from it. We must not allow ourselves to acquiesce in its reality; rather we must pray that it be forgiven and removed, and be ready to do whatsoever God's will and command may enjoin in respect of it. . . .

The union of the Churches is too great a matter to be the result of a movement, however cautious and far-sighted. . . . From this point of view I am not distressed by the well-known and widely regretted attitude of the Roman See towards union movements past and present. It was and is needful that someone somewhere should make a stand against the excessive claims of all Church movements, and assert that the union of the Churches is a thing which cannot be manufactured, but must be found and confessed, in subordination to that already accomplished oneness of the Church which is in Jesus Christ. It is in this sense that I understand the papal refusal to take a hand in the efforts which have hitherto been made towards union. And in this sense I would say that in those circles which are rightly pre-occupied with the thought of union it is impossible to be too cautious about 'open' Communion Services and the like. Much that is beautiful in itself is a very long way from being true, far therefore from being enjoined upon us or even permissible. (*The Church and the Churches*, pp. 26, 27, 47-49.)

Christian disunity is not, we believe, just a matter of 'unhappy divisions' which we can either gloss over or patch up. As Barth says, it is sin. St Thomas said that schism is one of the worst and most grievous of sins. For it is not just against human friendliness and mutual tolerance, but against genuine neighbourly charity, against *divine* love for one another. It is against the Atonement,

the work of Jesus Christ himself. It is against our own baptism, for as many of us as have been baptized have been baptized into his death, so that there be for us one Lord, one faith, one baptism, as surely as there is one Father of us all (Eph. iv, 5).

'Sin?' you may ask. 'But it is not *my* fault. I didn't do it! I don't even want it. I hate it too. I was just born and brought up in a Christendom I found divided.'

Very true—in all probability. Who, then, are we to blame? Our forefathers? Are we to maintain that all the Catholics in the sixteenth century were blameless, and that it was all the fault of the Protestants? Or *vice versa*? Or blame it all on the greed of medieval ecclesiastics or of those who would despoil them, the arrogance of Tetzels, the neuroses of Luther, the charms of Anne Boleyn? No, indeed, we must leave judgment to God. We are all under sin, though we ourselves have not initiated this sin—just as most of us believe that we have all inherited an original sin which we personally did not commit. But we cannot acquiesce in the one any more than in the other: we have to seek God's ways out of both. We are, in this matter of Church unity, in a guilty situation which challenges each of us here and now. We cannot live now in a united Church which only once was or one day will be. We have to put our position before God, his Christ, his will, here and now. 'What wilt thou have *me* to do?'

So prayer for unity, repentance for disunity, does not mean just praying for and being repentant for the other fellow. It is too easy just to pray for the other fellow: that will never hurt us or make any demands upon us. When our Lord prays that his followers may all be one, that does not mean everybody else, but not you and me. Prayer for our own unity in Christ's body may be very demanding indeed—it may be answered in quite unexpected and even painful ways. Let us make no mistake about it: a real Christ-given unity of the Church is bound to hurt, for it is going to mean the end of separate Churches and of the attachments and loyalties which in their separate ways they have evoked. Prayer for unity is likely to lead to sacrifice for unity; the sacrifice of much we hold most dear, to which we are most accustomed, which we most take for granted, and perhaps the adoption of much that is the opposite of all that. We cannot tell in advance of our prayer; but in prayer for unity according to God's will we may find much that we would rather not.

Peace, unity—we all want that. But the peace which Christ brings is very unlike what we usually think of as peace. When he was born, the angels proclaimed peace on earth to men of good will. But when he grew up he said he brought not peace but a sword. His peace, his unity, is not ours: 'Peace I leave with you, my peace I give unto you: not as the world giveth do I give to you' (John xiv, 27). The peace and unity of God literally passeth our understanding (Phil. iv, 7)—and often all that we might think reasonable and friendly and sensible. It is a peace which is found only in faith and the prayer of faith. And we should be ready for that prayer to lead to sacrifice, our sharing in the Lord's atoning sacrifice.

All that I have been trying to say has been expressed daily in the Roman liturgy long before this octave was thought of. The priest is there before the slain Lamb of God, with nothing of his own but his sins. Presently he and the congregation will take the atoning victim into themselves, and become one Bread, one Body, with him and with one another. But before they do so, the priest in the name of all speaks thus to the Lord before him:

'O Lord Jesus Christ, who saidst to thy apostles, Peace I leave with you, my peace I give unto you: look not on our sins but on the faith of thy Church, and vouchsafe to pacify and unite her in accordance with thy will.'



ASKING OTHERS TO PRAY FOR US¹

HELLE GEORGIADIS

THE week of prayer for Christian unity culminates with the feast of the conversion of St Paul on January 25th. St Paul is probably the most energetic and tireless worker for unity whom the Church has ever known. Many passages in St Paul's epistles are devoted to the theme of unity and the epistles themselves bear witness to his work for it.

But when we read these epistles we are struck immediately by

¹ A talk given during the Week of Prayer for Christian Unity, 1957, and reprinted here from *Sobornost*, June 1958, with the kind permission of the Editor.