

The Problem of Communication in our approach to other Christians

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Reunion is in the air today; in discussion in Church circles, in the press, on the radio and television, and even in the House of Lords. Among the non-Catholic Churches the last few years have seen schemes of reunion for South India, North India and Ceylon, and all these schemes show a readiness to examine established positions in the light of the present challenge to Christianity from atheism and materialism.

This drawing together of the non-Catholic Churches is comparatively recent, and is very largely the achievement of the Student Christian Movement and other inter-denominational societies that have made many of those who have worked with them impatient of the barriers that divide one denomination from another, particularly on the Mission Field. The result has been a growing awareness of the evils of division and of the damage done to the Christian cause in the eyes of the unbeliever.

It is, however, important to realize that this concern for unity is found on various levels from the superficial to that of real concern. In one Anglican college, where the students were becoming exercised about the question of intercommunion, a Free Church student, when asked why she wished to make her communion in the College chapel, answered without hesitation: 'Think of the time it would save', though her own church was less than two miles away. This remark may not be typical either of the student's true attitude or that of others, but the fact that it could be made explains why some responsible people, although caring deeply about reunion, appear reluctant to encourage such movements towards inter-communion. With a considerable group the question appears to be viewed in terms of good fellowship. As one likes to be able to say to one's friends: 'Come and have a meal with us', so in the life of the Church the invitation is offered to all who love the Lord Jesus to join in holy communion. But there are still

others, who while appreciating the sincerity behind this attitude, consider such an invitation premature, while Christians are divided in their beliefs about the Sacrament and what our Lord intended when he gave it to his Church. These too have a deep concern about the evils of division and desire that our Lord's high-priestly prayer for the unity of his followers may be seen to be fulfilled in the eyes of an unbelieving world, but they are genuinely doubtful of the value of pretending agreement before it has been reached.

We must also see that desire for unity at all these levels, deepened though some of it may need to be, is the work of the Holy Spirit preparing the way, in somewhat the same way as he did through the Mystery religions which in the first century A.D. showed man's growing awareness of those needs that Christianity was to fulfil. As Fr Bouyer writes:

Yet the almost sudden flowering of these cults at the very time when the old paganism was crumbling is a symbol of those aspirations of lost man which God Himself kindles because He wishes to respond to them. They are as a rough draft, very pale and inadequate, of what God is preparing to give man in answer to his deepest desires and infinitely in excess of his most sanguine hopes.¹

We all of us need seriously to heed such signs.

If one turns from considering reunion among the non-Catholic Churches to what Dr Mascall has called 'The recovery of unity' of Christendom, there stands on the one side the Catholic Church with her clear definition of doctrine and authority, and on the other a large number of Churches or denominations, some large, some small, many though not all belonging to the World Council of Churches, but all with their differing traditions and ideas of authority and government. All agree in accepting the authority of the Bible, at least in some measure, though some individuals and groups may hold extreme critical positions, but some would interpret it to support government by bishops, as in the Anglican Church, while others would use it to justify government being vested in the congregation or in elders. All alike belong to the Reformed tradition however, in the part allowed to individual judgment for decision both in matters of doctrine and of morals. As Eck said of Luther after examining him:

He declares that ecclesiastical obedience is not based on divine right, but was introduced by the ordinance of men and of the emperor. It may not be expressed bluntly in such terms but even where episcopacy

¹L. Bouyer, *The Paschal Mystery*, London 1951, p. xix.

has been retained, vital matters of doctrine, such as the nature of the eucharistic sacrifice, and morals, are left to the private judgment of the individual. What seems to have happened in some of the leading denominations is that some specific belief or viewpoint has been retained, episcopacy, or adult baptism, or rule by elders or by the congregation, but in other matters a wide variety of beliefs and practices has been tolerated.

Elsewhere the process of division is still continuing, and the movement towards reunion is counterbalanced by a multiplying of sects and meetings which have broken away from their parent bodies because of disagreement about some issue which seems to the individuals concerned to be of vital importance. About these one can only say that they are sincerely concerned about truth, even if their way of showing it appears tragic. But be they large or small, the non-Catholic Churches contain groups having many varying points of view about doctrine, accepting, whether they realize it or not, much or little Catholic teaching, but all lacking the central authority which can command the obedience of its members in matters of faith and morals, or even negotiate on behalf of its members about reunion with any assurance of the result proving acceptable to the rank and file of its members.

These are the people among whom this desire for reunion has grown; these too are the people among whom there has been for many years, a steady, and I believe a growing, movement towards the Catholic Church, which is surely the work of the Holy Spirit. Many years ago a leading Anglican theologian and teacher said: 'When someone's faith grows, it develops in a catholic direction'. The truth of this is borne out not only by the way many denominations have moved from a less to a more fully developed doctrine of the Church and sacraments, but also by the many individuals who have changed their allegiance to a Church that has retained more Catholic teaching than their own. It is partly this development that has made the movement towards reunion possible.

These are the people among whom we live and work, and with whom, whether we desire it or not, we are communicating in one way or another constantly: not those who have knowingly and deliberately rejected the Catholic faith, but who have never really heard it in its fullness or been in a position to understand it. If this movement towards reunion is a work of the Holy Spirit, if the claim that a growing faith necessarily develops in a Catholic direction is true, it is important that in some way they have the opportunity both to hear and to understand.

How can this be done? An experienced teacher knows that one of the major problems of teaching is not only the finding words to express his ideas, but words that will convey those ideas to the pupil. When the pupil speaks or writes, it is often necessary for the teacher to guess at his meaning, and then help him to find the words and phrases that he needs if he is to communicate his ideas effectively to others. This kind of insight is even more necessary in teaching religion than in teaching other subjects. At the moment it seems as if we have reached a point when this would not only be fruitful in teaching individuals and groups, but in discussion between the Catholic and other Churches. This approach is rendered all the more necessary because of the emotional content with which so many of the key words and phrases have become charged as a result of past controversy. If one considers such terms as authority; infallibility (sometimes confused with impeccability and hotly denied to the Church by many who allow it ungrudgingly to the daily press); transubstantiation; the Immaculate Conception, to name only a few of the terms which summon the hearer either to defend or to attack according to his point of view, one sees how language can become a cause of division rather than a means of communication. In discussing these subjects and attempting to communicate the Catholic doctrine they express, it is often necessary to begin by finding other terms, that will not antagonise the hearer before their meaning is considered.

This does not mean that accuracy of definition is not important. It is supremely so, and ultimately practice is governed by belief. A sound grasp of the faith is not only desirable in itself but is the necessary basis for any group of Christians wishing to work out principles of Christian living. It is foolish to shut one's eyes to the differences that divide Christians, or to imply that it all comes to the same thing in the end, and that in the meantime we can all jog along happily as we are. But while we frankly recognize the very real differences of doctrine between Catholics and non-Catholics, and among the non-Catholics themselves, we must also be on the alert to see the work of the Holy Spirit in bringing all who love God and seek to serve him, into the fullness of truth. We are therefore justified in looking for this even where at first sight it may not be apparent, and using it as a basis for communication.

There is probably no point of Christian doctrine where controversy has been more bitter and where words more sharply divide than over the eucharist and holy communion. Is there any indication here that

the teacher's approach, as outlined above, could lead non-Catholics to acceptance of Catholic teaching: Many, to whom terms like 'real presence' and 'transubstantiation' are anathema, seem in their devotional attitude to holy communion to show a seeking for our Lord's objective presence in the sacrament which those terms define. If this devotional attitude could be made the starting point of sympathetic discussion and exploration of the Catholic teaching about transubstantiation, there might be many who through this would come not only to an understanding of the Catholic point of view but find it the truth for which they are searching.

A similar approach could be made to various other doctrines where at present a divergence of opinion exists, but the willingness to do so might seem to involve an implicit recognition of Catholic authority. For the teaching Church, like all teachers, must have authority. Prof. Walsh writes of the teacher's authority:

To the belief of the child corresponds the authority of the teacher. Authority is a word likely in current educational discourse, pragmatically resistant to the external and given, to be met with suspicion and dismissed with contempt. But the word cannot be avoided, for authority enters deeply into the relation of learner to teacher. Educational authority is not, of course, coercive power, nor is it anything that can be conferred like a diploma or assumed like a gown. It is the quality of one who can be consulted with trust, and it is to be attained only by labour, patience and the abdication of self. The authority of the teacher is constituted in part by his pupil's recognition of his sincerity, in part by the worth of the standards he upholds. The first part of this proposition receives some attention today, but the second in a collective and irrelevantly egalitarian age attracts only the minimum of formal notice. The plight of modern civilisation is to be menaced more and more closely by the barbarism of literacy uninformed by value, by what Coleridge called 'the plebification of knowledge'. Upon the teacher at all times rests the obligation of speaking for intellectual sanity and spiritual health. In our time his obligation is all the more urgent for he is one of the very few with any power to be heard. If value has not the protection of the teacher's authority, civilisation is condemned.²

If this is true of the teacher concerned with general education how much more true of the position of the teaching Church in religious education? Authority is necessary for unity, and the very existence of the

²W. Walsh, *The Use of the Imagination*, London 1959, pp. 21-2.

World Council of Churches is the admission of the realization that this was lost at the Reformation. Could this be the starting point for discussion on the role of authority in religion?

One paper in the report of the Anglo-Russian conference of 1956 treats of the difference between dogma, theologoumena and private theological opinions.

Dogmas . . . are binding and necessary because their significance is absolute; the acceptance and profession of them is a necessary condition of our salvation. Their indisputable character rests upon divine authority: they are the voice, the teaching of God Himself in Holy Scripture and in Holy Tradition. Theologoumena on the other hand are the theological opinions of the Holy Fathers of one undivided Church and are only probable i.e. true in a greater or lesser degree.³

Some look for a possible line of rapprochement between the Catholic and non-Catholic positions here, hoping that some controversial teaching, such as that about the eucharistic sacrifice might be relegated from the position of dogma to that of theologoumena. But to do this to basic doctrines is to undermine the essential unity of the Catholic Faith. Surely this is a place for an experiment in communication in the spirit of 'forbearing and patient love which has its own compelling power of persuasion'.⁴ This might lead to a period of creative theological thinking such as delivered the Church from heresy in the early centuries, when terms like *homoousios* were coined, and christology defined. Then once again the essential unity of the Church would be manifested before the eyes of the world.

³ *Anglo-Russian Theological Conference*, ed. Waddons, London 1956.

⁴ *Osservatore Romano*, 1 February, 1959.