

DOES THE WAY THAT LEADS TO REUNION LET US ENVISAGE
THE SHAPE IT WOULD HAVE?

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April 1985

I have been asked in this paper to discuss "the goal of unity": how this goal appears, in the concrete, to a Roman Catholic, in the light of the various dialogues of reconciliation our Church has entered into. These considerations are intended to serve as a prelude to a "fuller discussion of 'Growth in Reconciliation'".

As I have pondered the manner in which I should undertake this task, the same thought has kept coming back to me: namely, that the final goal will only be achieved as the result of a process; it will find its historical shape through that process. What kind of process must take place on the way to the final goal? I wish to argue that the ecumenical movement stands at the threshold of a new phase: if we can grasp the implications of this moment, and respond to the call of God it entails, the final outcome, in a certain sense, will take care of itself.

Getting our bearings

Something of what I am saying is backed up by the comments to be found in Faith and Order Paper 116 of the World Council of Churches⁽¹⁾, in which leading ecumenists comment upon the Lima text, Baptism, Eucharist and Ministry (1982). They see this document as indicating an important new phase of the ecumenical movement. They note, on the other hand, that the movement towards unity is in danger of faltering. Nikos Nissiotis begins his Preface to this volume with the following remark: "A measure of uneasiness, doubt and fatigue became evident in ecumenical circles during the last decade". He notes that "many prominent, active and impatient ecumenists" have challenged the relevance of theological dialogue "in the face of the more urgent ^{need} of the churches to act together in addressing contemporary socio-political problems". Many Christians, he observes, "especially young people, tend to see in... ecclesiological debate a stagnation threatening the whole of the ecumenical enterprise"⁽²⁾.

Reviewing the development of the ecumenical movement during recent decades, we may well conclude it was inevitable that it should have to face the difficulties of the present moment. When the sterile confrontation of centuries came to an end, it was relatively easy to make real strides towards unity. The divisive effects of non-theological factors were recognized and began to

be transcended. As dialogue replaced polemic, it was possible to recognize, beyond differences which had been so much emphasised, the great areas of common ground which united us in the one faith. Standing upon this common ground together, Christians could look at their theological differences in a new spirit of trust and fellowship. The old slogans and partisanship which had made mutual understanding practically impossible could be set aside, as contemporary scholarship made it possible to view these differences within new perspectives shaped by the biblical message and the experience of the early Church.

In other words, great advances have been made without the generality of Christians or their leaders within our various traditions being profoundly challenged. I want to suggest, as I have said, that the ecumenical movement can only move forward if we recognize that we have reached a new threshold. And within the scope of this paper, I would argue that it is only in the light of this step forward that we can give any realistic description of the goal to which we must direct our efforts.

I find myself in sympathy with the judgment of Anton Houtepen, in the volume I have quoted. Unless we take up this further challenge, he observes, our "ecumenical conversations are in danger of becoming endless variations on the same theme: the ritual encounter of ecumenical experts, a permanent alibi for lasting divisions". Houtepen notes the dangers of such a stalemate. Rank and file members become restive when the delay prevents the Church from taking up the pressing issues of "justice, peace and survival". He points to the frustration of theologians who see that their statements of consensus have "no impact on the life and relations of the divided Churches". Third World theologians, he observes, are tired of dealing with the wearisome history of European conflicts⁽³⁾.

We would all agree that the ecumenical movement must find a way to move beyond this point. Is it possible to identify more clearly what this challenge is calling us to?

The way forward: shaping an attainable goal

When I review the work of ARCIC II in the light of what I have been saying I have misgivings. In particular, I ask myself whether we may not have neglected to take up an important issue underlying the "justification" question. Certainly, in the text we have drawn up much has been achieved. Real misunderstanding of opposed positions has been clarified, and a genuine consensus has been achieved by the members of the Commission. This consensus promises to provide the basis of recognition of a common faith on the part of our two communions. Yet I can understand the hesitation on the part of some of our constituents on both sides, as they find it hard to accept that the difference was nothing more than one of terminology and misunderstanding of what the other side really intended. I would like to suggest that the issue could be taken up at another level, in a way that would make an important contribution to the ecumenical movement at its present stage.

Louis Bouyer has more than once touched upon what I have in mind. Thirty years ago, concluding The Spirit and Forms of Protestantism, he urged Catholics to recognize "the original profound meaning of Protestantism": "To Catholics", he wrote, "lukewarm and unaware of their responsibilities, the Protestant movement, when rightly understood, recalls the existence of many of their own treasures which they overlook"⁽⁴⁾. More recently, he returned to the same theme. He judges that Archbishop Michael Ramsey's The Gospel and the Catholic Church "may one day be acknowledged as marking the most decisive turning point in twentieth-century ecumenism"⁽⁵⁾. According to the Archbishop, a viable ecumenism will seek a new and creative tension between the Church of Christ, fully conscious of the graces which constitute her existence, and the divine, transcendent Word, of which the Church is but recipient and steward. Bouyer argues that, because the Word cannot speak effectively to the world except in and through the Church, it is possible and necessary for Protestantism's essential concerns to be reconciled with the Catholic Church "as a prophetic movement of permanent significance and import". Outside the Church, on the other hand, "it loses its meaning, since the reformation to which it is directed, if it is not the reformation of the one Church... must see its object, its reason of being vanish"⁽⁶⁾.

If Bouyer is correct in what he says, we must conclude that both Catholics and Protestants must undergo a conversion if a genuine reconciliation of their positions is to take place. No doubt we are inhibited from giving the attention we should to the place of "conversion" in ecumenical developments, because the term's history easily fixates us at a level of meaning which implies little more than a change of denominational allegiance. It should be clear that what I am suggesting is metanoia at a far more radical level. I was led to recall Bouyer's observation in the context of reflection upon the theology of "Gospel". This reflection led me to recognize a neglect of the importance of this theme in Catholic theology. It also led me to acknowledge the prophetic character of the Protestant movement in its recovery of an appreciation of the dynamic power of God's Word in the life of his people. I was led to the conclusion that the essential conversion called for in the movement towards unity is a conversion to the ways of God revealed in the Gospel. Ultimately, the only ecumenical dialogue which will produce a genuine movement towards unity is a dialogue carried on between those who together enter into that essential dialogue of Christian faith, a dialogue with the Gospel.

Let us return to Faith and Order Paper 116. The recognition that only openness to God's designs will carry us forward is a theme which returns several times. In fact, as the authors of this volume point out, conversion is demanded by the inherent logic of the Lima document, in so far as it is an expression of "convergence".

Thus Nikos Nissiotis writes of the Lima document, "No one will be satisfied looking at this text solely from one's own confessional stance. It requires a conversion of heart and mind in order to confirm one's own confessional roots anew and together with other confessions within the one Church and biblical tradition"⁽⁷⁾.

Lukas Vischer calls for a change of heart on the part of those who are responding to the document. On the one hand, it must be recognized that "The apostolic faith is confessed not only by words but also in and through the sacraments and structures of the Church... The three texts show the Churches how to find their way back from their present divisions to that fundamental unity which is the precondition for hearing and confessing the Gospel"⁽⁸⁾. But on the other hand, he points out, those responding to the document must

also face the question of the "relationship between the living Word and the sacramental structures of the Church. How far is the unity of the Church really based on the sacramental structures? The experience of the Reformers and of the Reformation churches also counsels caution and restraint in this respect. The living Word becomes truly free only when the Church takes the step in the direction of common confession. Unity in the sacramental structures can be a dead unity"⁽⁹⁾.

Anton Houtepen sees the Faith and Order Commission's call for a response to the Lima document as marking "a decisive new phase in the ecumenical movement"⁽¹⁰⁾, which calls for "a time-embracing and life-long reception process: a constant hearing, learning and thanking attitude of life - obedience of faith"⁽¹¹⁾. In this context, he quotes the teaching of the second Vatican Council: "Every renewal of the Church is essentially grounded in an increase of fidelity to her own calling. Undoubtedly this is the basis of the movement towards unity"⁽¹²⁾.

Ulrich Kuhn speaks of the reception of the Lima document to which churches are invited as a "process" which "challenges us and encourages us to a further breach of the frontiers of our own tradition, to change in relationship to one another and in this way to move towards the fulness of Christ" What is called for is a "vital spiritual process, which is impossible without penitence and conversion on all sides"⁽¹³⁾.

William H. Lazareth sees unity as able to be restored only if each Church "takes decisions to overcome our disobedience to the will of Christ as expressed in his prayer for unity (Jn 17:1-26)". And he adds, "These decisions will be genuine only to the extent to which they imply a resolve to do what the re-establishment of communion demands: conversion through a constant return to the source which is God as revealed in Jesus Christ through the Holy Spirit. Such a conversion requires an effort to express the content of the faith in such a way that the life of the community is consonant with the Word of God"⁽¹⁴⁾.

Corporate conversion is a complex organic process. It calls for appropriate responses at all levels of the group. It involves stages of maturation and realization. While it is not acknowledged that we are all called to this metanoia, adequate reflection upon this process is not possible. Moreover,

the metanoia asked of us in this present moment of history must not be looked upon as a gratuitous burden: until we are united in the final Kingdom, the Christian life is a constant call to conversion.

The implications of a paradigm

Let us return to our original observation, that the final goal can only be envisaged in terms of the process which leads us from where we are now to the realization of that goal. The scholastics have a principle, fieri est via ad esse - the final product will best be understood if we appreciate its genesis. We have suggested that it is only a process of conversion which will lead towards the goal of unity. It follows that reflection upon this conversion will help us to envisage the concrete reality of a reunited Christian community.

The proposal of Louis Bouyer, to which we have referred, helps provide a paradigm for the carrying out of these reflections. He suggests that the authentic concerns of the Protestant tradition should be reconciled with the Catholic Church, as "a prophetic movement of permanent significance": that the Church of God should be both "Catholic" and "Protestant".

It belongs to the genius of the Catholic tradition to preserve the integrity of the Christian mystery. The handing on of the Christian mystery in its incarnational integrity makes possible the dialogue which must take place between the message of God's Word and the mundane and historical reality to which it is addressed. It is this Catholic integrity which saves those who receive the message of the Gospel from the shortcomings of that disembodied or fundamentalistic evangelism towards which the Protestant movement has often been tempted.

It belongs to the genius of the Protestant tradition to call the Church to a constant dialogue with the transcendent power of the Gospel message. At the level of daily experience, this means believing that in Jesus Christ we have come to know a gracious God who, through his holy Word, will be a living presence in each new day of our lives. In our lukewarmness, we of the Catholic and Orthodox communions have tended to presume that such a life in God's Word is only possible for chosen saintly souls, and for monks who make an extra-

ordinary conversion to the ways of the Kingdom. The whole Christian community must come to rejoice in the way in which this absolutely basic Christian truth has been shown forth by the Protestant tradition.

In the light of our paradigm, we may recognize that a similar call to conversion is to be found in the dialogue taking place between the Orthodox Churches and the Catholic Church. In the faith of the Oriental Churches, we find ourselves very close to the inspiring reality of the Church of the first centuries, for which Christian life is a communion of privileged access to a sharing in the life of the Most Blessed Trinity itself. It is the acknowledgment of this mystery which is the very source of the Church's communion. In the faith of the Catholic Church we find a community of belief and witness which speaks to the world of each age with a living voice. Each party to the dialogue must humbly acknowledge the special value before God of what they see in the life of their separated brethren. In the light of that recognition, they must acknowledge those limitations which call for a conversion if reconciliation is to be made possible in the concrete.

The Catholic Church does not hesitate to take up the challenge of expressing the Gospel truth as a message which must find appropriate expression within the historical actuality of each new age, and which challenges the shortcomings of human wisdom with a prophetic voice. This has called for a theological development which translates the constant message of faith as accurately as possible into terms appropriate to successive times and cultures; it has called for the development of structures which make it possible for the Church to speak with a recognizable and authoritative voice. But in carrying out this task, churchmen have not always avoided the pitfalls which threaten such a process. To separated Christians, this process has seemed at times to give rise to legalism and bureaucracy. We seem to have maintained unity through an excessive insistence upon uniformity. The witness of the Orthodox tradition calls us back to a unity in which access to the Trinitarian mystery is clearly paramount, and constitutes the vital source of unity in a diversity of traditions.

For their part, the Orthodox Churches must recognize that they have tended to pause in the mood and development of another historical age, so that the expression of the Church's living voice in successive ages becomes very difficult.

Both sides must enter into a metanoia through which, in the light of our new dialogue and fellowship, we acknowledge our limitations, and rejoice in the authentic Christian heritage we recognize in each other's life.

Finally, we come to the dialogue of which our meetings are a particular expression. The Anglican Church has its own admirable traditions, which must make their contribution to the life of a reunited Christian community. In particular, we may ponder the way in which the political genius of the Anglo-Saxon tradition has contributed to the life of the Anglican communion. That Anglo-Saxon tradition has given to the Western world much that is taken for granted in the democratic way of life which is its great strength. Democracy has been aptly described as "a political community of citizens locked in argument". The Westminster model of democratic government has been an outstanding example of political stability. Anglo-Saxon consciousness of the important values which unite a healthy political community has made it possible for differences to be contained within a small number of political groupings. By way of contrast, the political communities of other European traditions have often carried on their arguments in a manner which hastened to identify and define secondary issues under dispute, bringing fragmentation and confrontation on the part of an ever increasing number of political groups. This fragmentation, and the political instability it brought, has not infrequently given rise to the temptation to resort to a totalitarian solution to the problems of a divided political community.

One may well judge that we are touching upon something important that the Anglican communion could bring to a united Christian communion. We are challenged to find more effective procedures to achieve that "collegiality"⁽¹⁵⁾ which, at all levels, should characterize the life of God's people in the one faith.

In all the instances we have discussed, salient strengths are associated with characteristic weaknesses, with limitations which call for a conversion to a deeper fidelity. Certainly, the Roman Catholic communion must seek to make "collegiality" more effective in the life of the Church. For their part, the Anglican communion must ask itself whether the approach to which we have referred has not hesitated to identify issues which must be dealt with, if communion in the one faith is to be maintained. In particular,

since both the Catholic and the Protestant traditions find expression within the Anglican communion, may we not expect to find, within that communion, a special expression of that conversion and reconciliation to which we have referred.

A communion of traditions united in the confession of one faith

What institutional forms may we envisage, once the final goal of pilgrim unity is achieved? The second Vatican Council made the position of the Roman Catholic Church clear: "this sacred Council solemnly repeats the declaration of previous councils and Roman Pontiffs, that for the restoration or the maintenance of unity and communion, it is necessary 'to impose no burden beyond what is essential' (Acts 15:28)"⁽¹⁶⁾.

The implications of this principle call for further exploration. For instance, it may be asked what place should be given to teaching of General Councils which have taken place since the schism between Eastern and Western Churches. Louis Bouyer, to quote one respected Catholic theologian, notes that, before Bellarmine, these Councils were not considered ecumenical in the full sense. Concerning the binding force of their teaching in a reunited communion, he judges: "All that the West can and must ask of the East is that the work of these Councils be accepted provisionally, with favourable pre-judgment, as an essential positive element for a broader and more profound common examination of the questions"⁽¹⁷⁾.

The New Testament provides a normative model of the Church made up of communities having communion in the one faith, while showing forth in the variety of their traditions the divine splendour of the one faith. A reunited Church would find a new vitality with which to take up its task to the coming age. The conversion to which we have referred would be only the beginning of a life together in which all traditions should learn from each other to deepen their fidelity to the Gospel they must proclaim.

Let me conclude with the words spoken to me by an English priest in 1984. They struck me as prophetic, and contributed in no small measure to the approach I have adopted in this paper: "Are we taking ecumenism seriously enough? Christ's body is divided: we should be bleeding!"

NOTES

- (1) Ecumenical Perspectives on Baptism, Eucharist and Ministry, ed. Max Thurian, Geneva, 1983.
 - (2) p.vii
 - (3) p.143
 - (4) London, 1963, pp.272-273
 - (5) The Church of God, Chicago, 1983, p.146
 - (6) loc.cit.
 - (7) p.xii
 - (8) pp.5-6 (emphases of the author)
 - (9) p.8
 - (10) p.141
 - (11) p.150
 - (12) pp.151-152
 - (13) pp.170-171
 - (14) p.190. On p.193, Lazareth writes, "The question also arises whether the Roman Catholic Church could be taking more courageous steps in associating itself with councils of churches".
 - (15) In the terminology of the second Vatican Council, "collegiality" refers to episcopal collaboration. The term may be used in a broader sense, of all other manners of sharing and professing the one faith called for in the life of God's people.
 - (16) Unitatis redintegratio, n.18
 - (17) The Church of God, p.552. Cf. also J.M.R.Tillard, The Bishop of Rome, Wilmington, 1983, pp.16-17; F.Sullivan, Magisterium: Teaching Authority in the Catholic Church, New York, 1983, pp.59-60, where it is noted that Paul VI, in commemorating the seventh centenary of the Second Council of Lyons (1274), spoke of it as "the sixth of the general synod held in the West", and nowhere spoke of it as an "ecumenical council".
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