

Modern ecumenism: present problems

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*To the Pilgrimage to Our Lady of Walsingham, March 2005
Ecumenical Marian Pilgrimage Trust*

Present Ecumenism, while carrying overtones of empathy towards our separated brethren, is also an effort to achieve reunion among all Christians worldwide.

It may be viewed as a *fruitio* from the agony of two world wars in our lifetime, combined with a wider world vision engendered by the World Council of Churches [WCC] — a convergent of Protestant Churches after 1948 — and by the Second Vatican Council, completed in 1965, which gathered in all Catholics to a closer brotherhood that hoped to include the various Orthodox Churches and eventually all Christian brethren.

Paradoxically, endeavours towards widespread Christian unity have also tended to increase realisation of the depth of doctrinal differences and of the tenacity of denominational loyalties. Unity has had to be found beyond denominational consciousness. Mergers are rare, especially where episcopacy is set strongly and especially where doctrinal convictions diverge. Reconciliation does not arise from merely comparing ecclesiologies. The WCC 1952 Lund Conference — 'do together what you need not do apart' — commended a future focus upon four issues: Union of Christ and the Church; Tradition and traditions; Ways of worship; Church in its laws and customs (i.e. sociology).

An outcome of world Ecumenism has been that theology has become more closely biblical, more informed by careful history, more socially liturgical. The institutional gave place to 'the mystery of the Church'. All catechism has become more kerygmatic, more ordered to the laity and the Church's mission to mankind. The Catholic Curia created a Secretariat for Promoting Christian Unity — moved by Pope John XXIII. The Vatican Council in 1964, with delegates — observers from other traditions present to help, promulgated its Decree, *Unitatis Redintegratio*, covering Ecumenism. It encouraged a mentality among Christendom's 'separated brethren', many of whom had not retained the full reality of the Eucharistic mystery. Brethren were to share a spirit of mutual forgiveness and co-operation within one humanity recognised by each other. Speaking of a 'hierarchy of truths' within Revelation, the Decree called for distinction between the deposit of Faith and the formulation of faiths — for expressions of Revelation are often not conflicting but complementary. And yet: never, through charity, compromise the truth.

What then has emerged in our time as Ecumenism's principles? The first is that division among Christians is utterly not of the mind of God, whose Church should be united in being and in mission to others. That

unity is to be based not on fond friendships but on total truth, Christ being the focus. Central to reunion is the Eucharist within Church worship; and consequently a single ministry of the sacraments has to be shared by all. With such a ministry in union with and governance by the Word Incarnate, Christ's redeeming work continues. Essential to continuance is the work of the college of bishops, who share leadership in teaching and sacramental control.

The one true Church is obscured by Christian disunity, a weakness and even scandal in its confrontation with unbelievers and non-Christian religions. The Church then has to be solicitous of all its baptised — who belong to her, though not all fully. All forms of recognition and service of God — ecclesial communities — though some separated, share a common patrimony with Catholics, share the graces and gifts of the Holy Spirit. So all should recognise within Christendom the need to speak to the world beyond with a concordant voice; then also to one another with friendly trust, hoping to find further unison through dialogue — in holiness of thought and life.

Ecumenism is then a call to the will of God through dialogue about doctrinal conviction through zeal in common prayer; through listening for vocation towards unified service — through 'doing together unto God and for God'. Modern Ecumenism began as an urge to common action and co-ordinate witness, causing a 'fellowship of Churches'. The WCC has been able to pool different concepts of man's nature and his social ethics. Sacred to WCC is justice and public order — expressed as 'responsible society'. This receives the support of the United Nations, who share with Pope John Paul his characteristic emphasis upon 'the dignity of all mankind' as receivers of God's redeeming love. It is granted then that everyone shares a common destiny: that is at the heart of Ecumenism.

Ecumenism today: some examples

Supposedly the closest of Churches in Christendom today are the two that trace their roots back to the New Testament. The Pope from Poland has famously declared: 'Christianity breathes with two lungs, East and West'. True it was; true it will be — but between times has fallen the seventy years of Soviet Russia, doomed to aggressive atheism. Pius XII was reluctant to speak against the Nazis because his mind was essentially upon the godlessness of the short-lived Soviet empire. But the wall has come down: the Orthodoxy of 'Holy Russia' over a thousand years has returned, and Europe is as one again — with SS.Cyril and Methodius as its eastern patrons. But the present Patriarch, Alexei II, speaks only of the Catholic invasion of Holy Russia — what he calls 'spiritual aggression' and 'imperialism'.

The only unvisited country that Pope John Paul, in his last days, wants to bring his papal grace to, among major states, is Patriarch Alexei's, so to relink Orthodoxy with Rome. But Alexei II fears a take-over: he is on record as condemning the practice of 'children who have been baptised into Orthodoxy then being converted to Catholicism'. His voice finds resonance: there is a depth of resentment in Russia that takes Catholics by surprise. Dostoevsky's tidy phrase still stands in the East: 'If you are not Orthodox, you cannot be Russian'. Russia's churches and monasteries are rapidly

being rebuilt — but is that Christianity revived, or nationalism? And it is equally said that not only Catholics but also Protestants are practising 'spiritual aggression'.

Religiously there is little theological disharmony. On the ancient dispute about Creeds, the *filioque* clause, the US Catholic/Orthodox Commission has issued an agreed statement. The Pope himself shows due readiness to drop the disputed clause from any shared celebrations. But the point is not liturgy but what Rome calls 'pastoral work' and Russia calls 'proselytising', even among the far-flung parishes. Cardinal Walter Kasper of the Vatican's Christian Unity Council, visiting Moscow, describes Ecumenism as 'in a state of transition' in which all Churches are re-assessing their identities. This is not a time for progress.

The saddest of circumstances, because they are near home and were once so near success, are relations between Rome and Anglicanism. When the primates gathered at Windsor from around the world in mid-February, they were facing too many crises within to look out to any future union — even perhaps with the Methodists later on. Not only parishes and dioceses, but even cathedrals and episcopal establishments are dogged by financial strain. And the bishops are haunted by the twenty-six million pound cost of the process of incardinating women priests: it has left two questions — what of those who are unwelcome so not granted due status; and what of those now expecting their next logical stage, women prelates. Already Salisbury Cathedral has been governed for nigh on two years by Dean June Osborne, now called by the Queen's bidding to full office as Dean — and Leicester is presently governed by a woman dean summoned by her bishop. On 7th February 2004 in St Paul's Cathedral, where women hold high office, a service was held to mark ten years since the initial ordination of Anglican women in 1994. That has caused much change — even whole parishes opting out of episcopal control. Women have done expectedly well in practice, but that is not the point; Rome and the Orthodox as yet do not grant the principle, and nor do many Anglo-Catholics or traditionalists. Some churches, e.g. St Ninian, Whitby, have withdrawn from diocese to 'private' state, with their own liturgy — such as a 'Western Rite'. Those who then regard their building(s) as property then sink into Congregationalism, where the vicar is hired and kept according to the 'shareholders' requirement; the people in the pews becoming 'proprietors'. Then the wider laity drift away to more traditionally familiar ways of Church, taken from past perception. There is goodness there, but not common discipline, nor ultimate communality.

Ecumenism essentially demands energy, conviction, interior unity and peace among people. Anglicans worldwide are presently not at peace. Conservative slow-developing Africa, notably Nigeria, Kenya and Uganda, are in confrontation with the Episcopal Church of USA, fast-flowing and Liberal — over homosexual ordination. So permissions are withdrawn to share *ordo* and *episcopate* more widely and the Anglican Communion seems 'torn apart at its deepest level' (thus the Primates' meeting) as separate episcopal oversights are determined for dioceses — one bishop refusing to receive Communion at the same altar as another (this presently in USA). Then dire division settles to intolerance; and hopes of Ecumenism become evanescent, and wider brotherhood departs.

Walter Cardinal Kasper, president of the Vatican's Christian Unity Council, has said in public places that Ecumenism is presently 'in a state of transition' in which all Churches — some in crisis — are re-assessing their identities. He complained that variant currents, especially in Anglicanism, are complicating dialogue. Alas, a good instance of that is the work of ARCIC, which is now coming to an end for want of recent success. The second International Commission (from 1982) has published four agreed statements before beginning work on *Our Lady: Salvation & the Church* (1987), *The Church as Communion* (1991), *Life in Christ* (1994), and *The Gift of Authority* (1999), all within a dozen years. Work on *The role of Mary in the life and doctrine of the Church*, now become *Mary: Grace and Hope in Christ*, has taken five years, partly because of the various crises in Ecumenism and within Churches, and partly because Catholic interpretation of the place of Mary has caused 'deep controversy' from Anglicanism. ARCIC, as customarily, has endeavoured to break down what is called 'entrenched positions' in favour of language yielding a more common approach. Pope Paul VI was clear and adamant about this way. The Catholic spokesman for ARCIC speaks of 'get[ting] the Anglicans to understand the Virgin Mary, [for] they use a different language from us'. ARCIC means to translate the 1854 and 1950 Marian dogmas into a more accessible language achieving 'an eschatological perspective'. The Anglicans have accepted early teaching upon Mary as Ever Virgin. What still seems an obex, a difficulty, to agreement is the active role of saints, and intercessory power of Mary — 'who did not lay aside her beatific role when she ascended to heaven' (thus the Catholic spokesman). The promise of success is not strong, so it seems; there is an air of disappointment, not to say termination.

Hoping that ARCIC II has taken this into account, one recalls especially Our Lady of Lourdes, who within her sixteenth apparition on the feast of the Annunciation (25 March 1858) declared of her own very nature before time and at its first instant onwards, that she *is* the Immaculate Conception. With this the Church's first Fathers have by degrees taught that she is more than mother of Christ's manhood for she *is* Theotokos/Mother of God; and by virtue of these aspects of her being she *was* raised to glorification — but not beyond participation in the Church's Spirit driven life. She *is*, she is constituted, she is taken up — and she remains within the life of the Church her Son founded. Her many apparitions persistently confirm her permanent participation — together with the degree of devotion to her that tested holy people and the liturgical prayers of the Church are ever according. In the two thousand-year history of the Church Christ founded, once the Trinity and the Two Natures had settled, two issues constantly re-arise: *Ecclesia* and *Maria*, issuing in further depths of granted understanding. Our own age has witnessed this more than most others; and in other ages and places such as the Caroline Divines have equally insisted on the holiness of Theotokos, and her continued participation.

Ecumenism out beyond

Since the crumbling and warring of the Middle East, anti-Muslim prejudice has inevitably increased among Christendom. It is perhaps the United Nations that is most conscious of this. Recently its Secretary-General, Kofi Annan, has spoken of it as 'one of the most disturbing manifestations of bigotry today'. In an UN lecture at the New York Headquarters he said: 'Too

many people see Islam as a monolith intrinsically opposed to the West; but in fact western and Islamic people have long histories of commerce and of intermingling and intermarrying'. Indeed, historians such as Sir Richard Southern have lectured and written on this theme, taking it forward from the Middle Ages.

But more daunting is a European revival of anti-Semitism, despite 'messages of healing and mutual respect between communities'. In January 2004 the three seniors of the Council of Christians and Jews, the two Archbishops of Canterbury and Westminster, and the Chief Rabbi wrote to *The Times*, thus — 'Today anti-Semitism is resurfacing...incitement to hatred and active violence against Jewish people has increased'. They pledged themselves once more to combat all forms of racism, prejudice and xenophobia, saying that 'we will not permit [such] to stain our continent's future, as it has in the past'. They ended thus: 'we reject the misuse of religion and religious language in seeking to address political challenges. We seek instead to be heard together in our shared confidence that, in the mercy of God, the wounds of the world can be healed'. It was a truly ecumenical statement of joint will. Pope John Paul, in Jerusalem for the Jubilee Year, pushed a significant letter into a crevice of the Western Wall speaking thus: 'we are deeply saddened by the behaviour of those who in the course of history have caused these children of yours, Father, to suffer; and asking your forgiveness we wish to commit ourselves to genuine brotherhood with the people of the Covenant'. Those such letters leave little room for anti-Semitism, were they fulfilled.

But the Pope followed it up last Christmas [i.e. 2003] by calling the Lord, in his message *Urbi et Orbi*, to save mankind from 'the scourge of terrorism', which leaves no hope of accommodation in brotherhood of belief. Thus he spoke: 'Save us from the evils which rend humanity in these first years of the third millennium. Save us from the wars and armed conflicts which are lacerating entire regions of our globe, from the many forms of violence which assail the weak and the vulnerable'. He spoke of both Iraq and 'the endless violence in the Holy Land — the land where The Prince of Peace was born'. He repeated: 'Save us from discouragement as we face these fierce paths, paths which are always and everywhere urgent'. Under such conditions, Ecumenism cannot thrive, and the sharing of Faiths wilts. But, lest we doubt John Paul's will to win the world's hearts, we should know also that on New Year's Day he astonished those at St Peter's Mass by returning in his plans to the 'Pilgrim Pope' mode. He means on 8th December 2004 to mark the 150th anniversary of the papal proclamation of the dogma of the Virgin's Immaculate Conception (1854). By then he will have made four visits to Europe and to Mexico's International Eucharistic Congress!

We should remark upon a darker side of Ecumenism, where the State takes a hand over against the national Church. In France during 1876-79 the Republican party in power set out to destroy religious congregations, Catholic education and the 1801 Concordat with Rome (made between Napoleon and the Benedictine Pius VII under duress). After a decade most congregations were dissolved and education became non-sectarian. Pope Leo XIII issued his 1892 Bull advising Catholics to leave politics and accept secular law. In 1901 remaining religious congregations were expelled — hence Quarr Abbey on the Isle of Wight — and in 1905 a law was enacted separating Church and State, the Church losing its annual budget and the

bulk of its possessions. For years afterwards French clergy were preoccupied in 'ecclesiastical reconstruction', all ecumenical activity being frozen. The French Church has never wholly recovered; and now the many dioceses seriously lack priests, and faith-instruction. And yet, during the post War period and through the Vatican Council, some fine French ecumenists rose to be Cardinals — Yves Congar OP, Henri de Lubac SJ and two other Jesuits.

Today, President Chirac's government has banned all religious symbols in State schools — notably Muslim headscarves, Jewish skullcaps and prominent Christian crucifixes or crosses on walls. The new Act affects all France's secular public schools, but as yet does not extend to private schools. Part of the argument, the legislators hold, is that France must preserve its secular tradition against a wave of Islamic militancy among some five million Muslim inhabitants (and one recalls French North Africa). The Catholic hierarchy, who are directly affected, claim that compulsion is unenforceable and only persuasion would succeed. Such law making is disturbingly anti-ecumenical.

In Britain, Ecumenism feels the door locked in its face when a country with an officially established Church (other Churches around having once been established, in Ireland and Wales) allows its Government to commend in religious education a clear place for Atheism/Agnosticism. The Decalogue of Moses is to be put aside, the Lord's life is to be reduced, and religion is called in schools 'spiritual education'. The young are to learn to doubt and digress and both test the plausibility of Scripture's pages.

Initial creation and ultimate afterlife fall into doubt and unguided choice. New Labour's Public Policy Research Institute has commended that 'pupils will be actively encouraged to question the religious beliefs they bring to the class', so to choose what they judge best as supported by their evidence. Yet some say: 'Judeo-Christianity has sustained us for 2000 years; we now need it all the more and in more detail'. This puts Ecumenism at a distance, there being now no agreed doctrine nor refined definition nor co-ordinate tradition. There is just unauthoritative opinion.

Christ said at the last: 'May they be one, Father, as we are one' and 'Not for these alone do I pray' and 'May the world believe that You sent me'. His missionary Apostle wrote later: 'Christ is like a single body, wherein its organs together compose oneness in the Spirit... God has combined the parts so that there might be no division: when all flourish, all rejoice together'. That is of the essence of Ecumenism. But it presumes peace, shared search, and vowed, co-commitment. Our histories prevent peace; our pride in our prejudices prevents rediscovery; our insisistences, ceasing to listen, cause us to go our separate ways.