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Can the Churches Unite?

By
W. I. Lonergan, S.J.

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Can the Churches Unite?

IT is a matter of history that until quite recently the various Protestant sects considered themselves as completely rivals of one another in the Lord's vineyard as they were antagonists of Jewish rabbis or Buddhist priests. Only on one point was there traditional unanimity—in their protests against the Catholicism for which Rome stood that gave them their common name. Lutherans anathematized Calvinists, and Presbyterians Methodists, and Anglicans Congregationalists, as vigorously as Rome did the lot of them. This was logical and to be expected for each foundation rested on the belief that it was the sure custodian of the Christian Revelation; and truth cannot be tolerant of error, how tolerant soever it may be towards the erring.

In our day, and more especially in our country, Protestant Christianity has grown more modest in its claims. Indeed, to Catholics it seems suicidally modest. Speaking of the delegates to the 1928 Lausanne Conference on Faith and Order, Dr. William A. Brown, of Union Theological Seminary, said: "They recognized that truth is many-sided and that no man and no Church possesses the whole." One surmises that neither Luther nor Wesley nor John Knox nor Cotton Mather nor Jonathan Edwards would say Amen to that statement. In his sermon on the same occasion the late Bishop Brent announced: "Ours is a Church which is inclusive rather than exclusive." And the head of the New York Protestant Episcopal diocese, elsewhere trying to reconcile irreconcilables, put the same proposition even more unmistakably: "The Episcopal Church is fundamentally and essentially Catholic in her faith and teaching . . . she is also truly Protestant in the original and historic meaning of that word. - - -"

"It is now acknowledged," notes another Protestant cleric, "that each sect contains only partial elements of the whole Christian truth, and therefore no one of them can disregard the truths held by all other Christian bodies."

Here, surely, is a *volte face* from the traditional teaching. It would seem to imply that the founders and earlier members of the respective denominations had been in error about the convictions they held and the positions they main-

tained, to say nothing of the more damaging confession that Christ, whom all profess to worship, had been faithless to His promise which guaranteed that when the Holy Spirit should come His Church would be in possession of *all* truth.

There is no need to repeat here the story of the evolution of the Church-unity movement in the past half century. Lambeth, Stockholm, Malines, Lausanne, are the principal chapter titles. In actual achievement there has been some pooling of administrative functions and economic resources—some federation; but in only four important instances has an organic union been effected. In Canada, Methodists and Congregationalists and the larger part of the Presbyterians combined in 1925 into the United Church of Canada. Seven years earlier, in the United States, the United Lutheran Church in America was formed from the union of the three most representative local Lutheran bodies. In Scotland, the breach between the Presbyterians of the Established and United Free Churches was healed in October, 1929. And during the late Lambeth Conference, to facilitate a combination of the Anglican and Evangelical Churches in South India (Wesleyan, Presbyterian and Congregational), the Church of India, Burma and Ceylon severed its legal dependence upon the Established Church of England. Elsewhere attempts at organic and corporate union have proven abortive or only partially successful.

That the result of the movement for Church unity should be so meager hardly surprises Catholics. They cannot but wonder, for example, by what rational process there can be question of re-uniting Lutherans and Episcopalians, or Anglicans and Calvinists, or Methodists and Catholics that were never one. There can only be a re-union of things that were once together and became severed.

There is something unsound, too, in the premise from which Church-unity discussion usually starts. It connotes adherence to the religious principle of religious indifference, that one religion is as good as another, that it does not much matter what one believes. It implicitly confesses that one or both of the combining sects is lacking in something essential to the adequate concept of Christ's Church. It savors of the obviously inconsistent and dangerous admission that His Church is mutable and defectible and that

the basis of salvation has shifted from His day to our own. It supposes that there never was (at least for the last 400 years) and is not now a Christian Church *de jure* and *de facto* one in doctrine, in government and in worship, conformable to Christ's prophecy. Intelligent Catholics fail to see how any self-respecting religion that calls itself Christ's can endorse such assumptions.

The following editorial in a Methodist paper apropos of the combine of the Anglican and Evangelical Churches in South Africa strikes one as amazing in its implications:

It is believed by the framers of the plan that each of the several parties may enter it without sacrifice of *principle* beyond surrendering the thought that *one's own denomination alone is entirely right*. The non-episcopal elements (Wesleyan, Presbyterian and Congregational) accept the episcopate without accepting "apostolic succession." It is provided that at the consecration of the first new bishops there shall be the laying on of hands jointly by three bishops and by representative elders of the other communions involved. The ancient creeds are accepted "as witnessing to the safeguarding the faith which is continually affirmed in the spiritual experience of the Church of Christ and as containing a sufficient statement thereof for a basis of union." Freedom in the form of public worship, instead of uniformity is assured. (*Italics inserted.*)

Moreover, the Church-unity movement blinds itself to the patent truth that Protestantism is, of its very nature, the seed not of concord but of discord. When Luther flung the gauntlet of defiance at the Papacy there was but a single dissident group. When the American commonwealth was founded Protestantism in the Colonies had already disintegrated into twenty-eight distinct denominations, nineteen of them heirlooms of the Old World, nine of native origin. Today there are in the United States, exclusive of the colored race, more than 150 Protestant denominations. Humpty-Dumpty like, Protestantism through the centuries has had a great fall, and all efforts at putting it together again seem both illogical and utopian.

With private interpretation of Scripture as an admitted initial principle of belief, and without an accepted infallible teaching body to declare authoritatively what is or is not of the essence of Christianity, it is not surprising that every important religious topic should be a manifold source of sectarian divergencies:—the Eucharist, the function and mode of Baptism, the question of Christ's atonement, the

nature of the Christian ministry, Sunday or Sabbath observance, to say nothing of moral problems like divorce, companionate marriage and birth control. If Christianity is purely man-made there is room for give-and-take in all these matters; if Divine, parleying can have no place.

As a fact not only is Protestantism by nature disruptive but experience proves that the very effort to achieve organic union among different denominations in the past has but resulted in new sects. In this wise we got the Swedenborgians and Campbellites and when the United Church of Canada was formed, the minority Presbyterian group branched out for itself. In the 1929 Scotch Church merger, even while the celebration to mark the union was being held in the Edinburgh cathedral, a dissident group was meeting in Glasgow to perpetuate the United Free Church. And we are told by the Lambeth report that when the United Church of India becomes a fact it will be no part of the Anglican communion, though one of the elements in its composition is a decidedly Anglican group.

In its entirety the problem of Church unity involves two distinct issues: one, that of non-Catholics among themselves; the other, their union with Rome.

So far as organic union with Rome is concerned, whether there be question of the Protestant sects or of the Oriental schismatical Churches, except under the conditions laid down by our Holy Father Pope Pius XI in his Encyclical, January 6, 1928, it is an absolute impossibility.

The unity of Christians [His Holiness notes] cannot be otherwise obtained than by securing the return of the separated to the one true Church of Christ from which they once unhappily withdrew, to the one true Church of Christ standing forth before all, and which, by the will of its Founder, will remain forever the same as when He Himself established it for the salvation of mankind . . .

In the one Church of Christ no one is found there and no one perseveres in it unless he recognizes and accepts obediently the supreme authority of St. Peter and his legitimate successors.

Let these separated children return to the Apostolic See . . . "the root and matrix of the Catholic Church," not indeed, with the idea or hope that "the Church of the living God, the pillar and ground of truth," will abandon the integrity of the Faith and bear their errors, but to subject themselves to its teaching authority and rule.

Would that the content of this Encyclical were more familiar to the Faithful. We should not then witness the

sad spectacle of some of our separated brethren, no matter what their denomination, being misled by poorly informed Catholics into believing that, after all, they are not so different from Catholics; that at some future day the Church may come to look at things religious as they do; that she may, for example, change her attitude about such a question as Anglican Orders as if the Holy See's decision were not "fixed, confirmed, irrevocable"; that some adjustment may be found that will be satisfied with the recognition in the Pope of a Primacy of mere honor or responsibility, etc.

For Rome the Oriental Church is schismatical and all Protestant sects heretical. These last may be more or less Protestant but they cannot be more or less Catholic, for no one of them is genuinely Catholic at all—with a capital C—let alone more Catholic than another. In the sense that some of them are less national and more widespread than others, they may call themselves catholic—with a small c—or in the sense that one group of them has grafted certain Catholic rites or ceremonies or even the entire liturgy on to their original Protestant doctrines or practices, usage of the capitalized word may be tolerated among them, but there is no historic and juridic right even in the Church of England to the title *Catholic*. He who is not with Christ is against Him, and he who soweth not with Him scattered!. There is but one fold, one vineyard, one kingdom, one Mystical Body of Christ.

As for organic union between the Protestant Churches and the Eastern schismatics, frankly, there is not the slightest probability of its achievement. It is true that in some of the world meetings organized to discuss reunion the Greek and Oriental Churches have sometimes had representation or participation, either officially or through private observers, but their position towards union with the Protestant sects is quite settled. Here are the words of one of their recognized spokesmen, Archbishop Germanos, Metropolitan of Thyateira, and Exarch of Western and Northern Europe:

It must, however, in no way be supposed that the Orthodox Greek Church can recognize a full and absolute reunion, that is a complete communion in the Mysteries, in cases where agreement of faith does not exist . . . According to the Orthodox conception, it

is necessary that the ancient, undivided Church should be taken as the pattern of a future reunion . . . It is only upon such a basis, i.e., agreement of faith, that reunion with the Orthodox Church can be regarded as valid and permanent.

Passing to the question of organic union among Protestants themselves we are also confronted with apparently insurmountable difficulties to its realization, which even the most optimistic advocates of the unity movement cannot overlook. The Stockholm Conference on Life and Work, and the Lausanne Conference on Faith and Order, and the recent Lambeth Conference, indicated this.

Anglicans and Episcopalians have time and again made plain that they cannot accept the Congregationalist or Presbyterian view of the ministry. In a symposium on the Reunion of Christendom, edited by Sir James Marchant, in 1929, Bishop Manning, of New York, had this to say:

The Episcopal Church . . . holds that the Faith and Order of the Church are from Christ Himself . . . It is not within our power to create a new Faith and Order for Christ's Church. The only basis for a true reunion is our common acceptance of that which comes to us from Christ.

Because of this attitude on the part of the Protestant Episcopal Church as contrasted with less dogmatic claims of the other sects about the Christian ministry, and notwithstanding that Leo XIII has officially and authoritatively decided that the Anglican Church has no valid Orders, it has failed to enter into full membership with the Protestant Federation of Churches in America. Listen to Bishop Manning again:

Its platform is one upon which the Protestant Churches can rightly and consistently stand, but for the Episcopal Church the platform is not large enough . . . For the Protestant Churches to stand together on this platform is a step towards the goal of world-wide reunion, but for the Episcopal Church it would be a step in the opposite direction.

On the other hand, Dr. Alfred A. Garvie, writing on the attitude of the Free Churches in England towards Anglican Orders and consequently organic union, says:

It would be an offense to the conscientious convictions of many Anglicans that a minister, not episcopally ordained, should celebrate the Eucharist; and they could not without doubt or scruple accept

the Elements from his hands. It would be no less an offense to the conscientious convictions of all Nonconformists so far as they have found utterance, for ministers already ordained to submit to a second ordination in order to qualify them to administer this ordinance, in all the churches, whether episcopal or not.

The mind of the Protestant Churches in Germany is thus summed up by Dr. Otto Dibelius, General Superintendent of the *Kurmark*:

No German Church is in a position to allow its doctrinal traditions to be touched . . . Also in respect to its ministerial Orders, German Protestantism stands by the Reformation traditions . . . No Protestant Church of Germany would consider the remodeling of its episcopal Order on the pattern of the Roman Catholics or the Anglicans even worth discussing.

Independent of the practically insurmountable barriers to inter-denominational union but having an equally important bearing on the movement in general is the fact, quite commonly lost sight of or at least not sufficiently stressed, that the leading Protestant groups are today themselves *internally* divided into the Fundamentalist and Modernist camps. Logically un-Protestant in their denial to the Modernists of the right to interpret Scripture as they list, the Fundamentalists, in addition, stultify Christianity by setting it in opposition to current scientific findings and experimental truths. On the other hand, Modernism is itself subversive of traditional Protestantism, rejecting many of the truths that the Reformers were ready to die for, even the very Divinity of Christ and all notion of the supernatural.

How widespread the disagreement among Protestants even in the same sect is can be readily gathered from our contemporary Protestant publications, while how pathetic the situation is can be gauged from the answers to a questionnaire which Professor George H. Betts of Northwestern University addressed about two years ago to some 500 denominational clergymen in and about Chicago. Of 100 answers, 13 denied belief in the Trinity, and 9 that God was omnipotent; 24 rejected miracles, 19 the virgin birth, 12 Christ's resurrection. How far apart Bishop Barnes and the retired Archbishop of Canterbury are on basic Anglican beliefs, and Doctor Manning and Canon Pritchard, or Doctor Reiland or Doctor Guthrie of the Protestant Episcopal Church of New York, on the value of the Creed, the Thirty-

Nine Articles, and the provisions of the Book of Common Prayer, is well known. Prescinding from petty personal squabbles that sometimes occupy the center of the stage in religious discussions, it is not uncommon that vital issues are involved. We had some evidence of that in the dissentient views expressed with Bishop Manning's presentation of the ostensible position of his Church regarding the episcopacy and Orders on the occasion of Dr. Gilbert's consecration, October 28, 1930. He was only repeating what he and others in his communion had stated time and again and yet, not merely his personal enemies, whose opinion may well be discarded because of their personal prejudice, but others also took issue with him. When the late Lambeth Conference passed its famous Resolution sanctioning contraceptive practices the diversity of opinion regarding the very fundamentals of morality was again illustrated and in the Manning-Lindsey episode in 1931 we have found Protestant churchmen again radically divided on the lawfulness or unlawfulness of so-called companionate marriage. Surely the sects must first set their own houses in order by settling the high-church-low-church and Modernist-Fundamentalist controversies before they can hopefully entertain ideals of inter-denominational union.

After all, the whole religious question which so perplexes the Protestant world is for the Catholic a simple and easily soluble one. The real issue for the honest seeker is merely this: Is Christ the Son of God and did He actually found the Church now popularly referred to as the Roman Church, with its hierarchical organization and the attributes of authority, infallibility and indefectibility. The answer to this query is the key to the solution of all other religious difficulties. And because he is convinced that he possesses the key the Catholic Christian has no unity-movement problem. On the rock of Peter Christ built not several Churches but one, His Church, and it is only when men are in union, (not a vaguely spiritual or sentimental union, but a vital corporate union), with Peter's successors that their faith shall be firm and impregnable, even as the rock itself, which though lashed by the waves of heresy and schism and infidelity, promises to remain unmoved and immutable "even to the consummation of the world."



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