

love is the end for which we were created, and for which our nature as God fashioned it is designed.'

We began from the evident indifference of most of our fellow countrymen to the question of Christian unity, and from what may be called 'the newspapers' point of view', either that Christian unity is impossible, or else that it is something easily achieved, once the dogmas have been cleared out of the way. We have arrived, as reflection on this subject in the end must, at the seventeenth chapter of St John. We have passed from schemes of prayer for Christian unity based on our ideas of how it should be brought about, to the humble petition that our Lord in his immeasurable goodness will deign to unite our feeble requests to his one great high priestly prayer. We have thought to discern, in this latter way, a method by which not only Anglicans and Free Churchmen, but rather all who profess and call themselves Christians may, without disloyalty to him who is the truth, be drawn more fully into the unity for which the holy and undivided Trinity has made us.



## MAY WE PRAY FOR THE UNITY OF THE CHURCH?<sup>1</sup>

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**T**HE most recent Papal documents dealing with the problem of Christian unity are very careful to remind us of what the Catholic doctrine on the subject of the Church and its unity is. The fear is expressed in them, in several places, lest an anxiety to promote Christian unity, commendable doubtless but not sufficiently clear-sighted, should lead in the minds of some to a certain playing down of the essential teaching of the Church in this matter. We have in mind some expressions now current that these documents quite evidently avoid for fear that their use might lead to a dangerous confusion in the minds of their readers. It will be useful, therefore, with a view to securing complete fidelity to the full meaning of these documents, to examine here one of these expressions, in order to settle accurately, with exact theological terminology, in what sense and context

<sup>1</sup> A translation of Chapter I, Part II, of *Les Voies de l'Unité Chrétienne*. Cerf 1954.

it may be used, and when, on the contrary, it should not.

Can it be said, for example, that we ought 'to pray for the Church's unity'? An answer to this question will necessitate a clear definition of the meaning we put upon the word *unity*. If the intention of the phrase is to ask God to grant to his Church a quality or endowment that it has not yet got or that it has ceased to possess, we must say, quite categorically, that it would be incompatible with Catholic doctrine. In founding his Church Christ not only promised it indefectibility, but conferred on it endowments essential to its existence and the carrying out of its mission. The possession of these endowments must be sufficiently evident to enable it to be recognized as the Church founded by him. They are the *notes* which have been incorporated in the creed unity, sanctity, catholicity, apostolicity. For the Church no longer to possess one of them would be for it to cease to exist, to cease to be what Christ created it to be unfailingly; and this is an impossibility.

But in saying that we have not said all there is to say. The inevitable lot of everything existing in this world is also the inevitable lot of the Church. To see this clearly we must employ the distinction the theologians recognize between its *essential* and its *accidental* perfection. Its essential perfection secures to the Church every element that goes to the making of its indefectible nature. This nature can in no way fail it, and may be said, within its own limits, to be incapable of degrees, it cannot vary, or be less or more. Accidental perfection on the other hand concerns the extent to which, outside those limits, each of these essential elements is, at any particular time, more or less effectively realized. There is scope here for an almost infinite diversity of degrees and modes, according to the impact upon the Church of the vicissitudes of its historical environment. It is in this sphere that the substance of its development and progress lies, and also unfortunately of its setbacks and decadence.

The essential unity of the Church exists in, and, is subject to, this sphere of accidental change. Three conditions are fundamental to the constitution of the Church's essential unity, agreement in faith, incorporation in a single hierarchically governed organism, and, presupposing the fulfilment of these first two conditions, participation in the same sacraments; in particular the celebration and common reception of the Holy Eucharist. It

is altogether meaningless to ask God that there may be on earth, as if at the moment did not exist, a religious society, tracing back to Christ, in which the unity constituted by these three characteristics is realized. One might as well ask God that human beings should be composed of body and soul. A society of this kind has existed since the first Pentecost, and, in accordance with Christ's promise, cannot *not* exist. This is the Church, and the Christian Community which is faithful to the Successor of St Peter asserts, vigorously and uncompromisingly, that it and it alone embodies these endowments, and in particular the note of unity; that they are unique, and that in their essential perfection they constitute the very being of the Church Christ founded.

But from within the Church, as it now exists, we must not evade the consideration of what we have called the accidental perfection of this same essential endowment of unity, namely the diversity of degrees and modes in which it can be clothed. Here, as we have said, there is a place for less and more, and in consequence the phrase 'to pray for the unity of the Church' takes on a positive sense which we can and should retain. We can and should ask God that the unanimity of all the members of his Church, in the assimilation and living expression of the faith, should become day by day more perfect; that the inner cohesion of the Mystical Body of Christ, in which as members they are incorporated, should constantly grow closer. The effective cause of this growth would be a more perfect understanding between those who exercise authority and those who accept it, and a wider and more vital extension of the unity of charity, expressed in and deepened by a common sharing in the same sacraments.

What an immense field lies open in this way not only to our prayer, but to our thought and efforts. For our prayer will not be fully sincere unless it is accompanied by intelligent effort to grasp three things with growing clarity and penetration. These are the demands made upon each of us, if a deeper unity in faith is to be attained, if the essential accord between pastors and their flocks is to become more complete, and if our whole being is to grow more rooted in our Lord's Mystical Body by the receiving of his Eucharistic Body, and by our use of the other Sacraments. A deeper grasp of these things can only come, to each of us according to his particular responsibilities, by the light of the Holy Spirit under the safeguard of the Church's teaching.

The danger here will be of contenting ourselves with *simpliste* solutions to the problems set us by these aspirations after a progressively more perfect unity. The unity with which we are concerned is not a least common denominator unity, but a unity of fullness. Agreement in faith demands and does not exclude the intellectual probing which sets out to make clear by contrast the multiple aspects of revealed truth. The cohesion of the body of the Church, within its hierarchical organization, is not achieved solely by an obedience more or less passive on the part of the flock, but also by the watchfulness of the pastors, alert to recognize the movement of the Spirit in the aspirations and initiatives of the faithful. The Church admits of diversity of rites in the one sacrifice, of differing disciplines working through an obedience common to all. The Church grows through the union of charity, by which the common sharing of the sacred mysteries becomes a reality, not merely by quantitative extension but, before all else, by a qualitative deepening of its sacramental life. All this will be in our minds when we pray for the unity of the Church.

It is much to be wished for example that the element of unity in the Church constituted by the common allegiance of each of its members to the same head, the Pope, the successor of St Peter, should be harmoniously complemented by a strengthening of the organic bonds which bind these members to each other—the faithful into the society of their own parish, the parishes into the society of their own diocese, the local Churches of different nations into the society of the Church universal. For the unity of a body does not consist only of those elements in it which unite its members with the head, but also of all the elements which, under the head's control, unite those members and bring them into harmony with each other.

If then we exclude the use of the phrase 'to pray for the unity of the Church' in the sense first indicated, it is clear in how many contexts its use is open to us in the second sense, which has here been elucidated. And not in the matter of prayer only, but in the fields of thought and action as well.