

The launching of the Catholic Edition of the Revised Standard Version of the Bible is an important symbolic event which was suitably commemorated by a service of biblical readings in Westminster Cathedral. For the first time in centuries the christians of England share a common text of the scriptures. There are a few minor changes in the Catholic Edition and, of course the deuterocanonical books are included, but substantially it is identical with the version used by all other christians. The event will not make a great deal of practical difference since catholics have been using the R.S.V. for years in any case, but it marks the official acceptance by the hierarchy of this practice, although I understand that even yet the book has not been technically authorised for use in the liturgy.

In this context it is worth enquiring what would be the precise purpose of such an authorisation. There would seem to be two possible reasons for it. Either it is to ensure uniformity of scripture readings throughout the country (but this it plainly would not achieve nor is it desirable that it should) or else it is to ensure that the version used contains nothing contrary to catholic truth. One might suppose that for a version of scripture to contain no theological error it is sufficient that it be accurate – though I have seen the following note appended to the *Imprimatur* in an American bible: ‘The *Nihil Obstat* and *Imprimatur* are official declarations that a book or pamphlet is free from doctrinal or moral error. No implication is contained therein that those who have granted the *Nihil Obstat* and *Imprimatur* agree with the contents opinions or statements expressed.’

It might well be thought that in this present age, the consensus of the scholarly community is a better guarantee of accuracy in a version of scripture than is the *Imprimatur* of the hierarchy. The bishops would of course, in any case consult biblical scholars – but why should such a procedure be necessary at all? There are surely enough of both learned journals and works of popularisation for any parish priest to discover for himself which versions are generally regarded as reliable and which are not. The very fact that the English hierarchy have for years authorised the reading of Mgr Knox’s translation of what Dom Bernard Orchard the other night described as ‘St Jerome’s hasty rendering’, but have not yet

authorised the R.S.V. would indicate that the system of centralised licensing is not altogether satisfactory.

There is, however, more to the idea of authorisation than this. Reading at Mass is a liturgical act, that is to say an act of the whole community; it is therefore perhaps appropriate that even the text the lector uses should be handed to him by this community in the person of the bishop. Seen this way, the authorisation of the text becomes one of the minor symbols of the participation of the whole church in the celebration of the local community. On the other hand since the bible is by its very nature the book of the people of God, the reading of any version in any christian assembly is always a making present of the whole church in Christ.

The presence of the Body of Christ precisely through the proclamation of faith in scripture is no more confined to the Roman church than is this presence in baptism, and the publication of a common scriptural text is a fine acknowledgement of this.

Now that we can officially share the same version of scripture, the next move is evidently to institute not only a common ritual for baptism but the common celebration of this sacrament. We should make it perfectly plain that we do not resent baptism in other churches, that, say, anglican baptism is not something we grudgingly admit may be 'valid', but is a celebration of faith in Christ in which we would be delighted and privileged to participate. There seems no theological reason why an ecumenical service should not be the normal context for christian baptism. One valuable consequence of this would be the suppression of the present corrupt English practice of indiscriminately 'baptising' converts *sub conditione*.

A common scripture and a common baptism draw us inevitably to consider the common eucharist. Under what circumstances, if any, should catholics share the eucharistic meal with other christians? This question, which is widely discussed in America and on the continent of Europe has received very little attention in England. Intercommunion is in any case rarely practised anywhere and never, I think, with official ecclesiastical approval. The case for it looks at first sight obvious enough. When christians are working together and, above all, are suffering together, in some common cause which is plainly the cause of Christ – work for peace, for example, or for starving refugees or for civil rights – it seems absurd that they should not be able to consecrate their unity in Christ's work by joining together in the sacramental enactment of his sacrifice. Moreover if it is by prayer that unity will finally be achieved, surely this most solemn prayer in common should be the most effective means by which we may all become one. For St Thomas Aquinas, after all, the precise effect of this sacrament is the grace of unity in the mystical body of Christ.

Nevertheless it seems to us that, in general, intercommunion is undesirable. Until the Council this would have been taken for

granted by any Roman Catholic: *Communicatio in sacris* was quite simply prohibited by Canon Law (can 1258). The Decree on Ecumenism has, however, changed all that. After speaking of the value of prayers in common, the Decree goes on to say that *Communicatio in sacris* is not something to be used *indiscriminately* for the restoration of Christian unity (para. 8). The Decree does not explain what could be involved in an occasional legitimate use of such common worship but it does not seem that a common eucharist is out of the question. The reason the Fathers give for their caution in this matter is that common worship is a sign of unity in the church, a unity that is not yet achieved. Nevertheless they do go on to say that since it is not only a sign but a means of grace it is sometimes to be commended. Perhaps we might even say that for the moment intercommunion is only justified when it is *not* officially authorised, for such authorisation would seem to be an official proclamation that unity is at last achieved.

Of course it is absurd that Christians of different churches should not share the same eucharistic meal, but it is an absurdity that arises out of, and is a sign of, the real tragedy of Christian divisions. We do not end this division by suppressing the sign. Some of those who argue most vehemently for frequent intercommunion sometimes give the impression that for them the tragedy of disunion lies in the fact that we can't all go to the same church on Sundays – that if only we could overcome our traditional hostilities (a mere hang-over from a dead past) and could bring ourselves to approach a single table, Christian unity would be achieved. But the tragedy lies much deeper than this. It is hardly at all a matter of hostilities, it lies in the fact that we have not found out how to be authentic Christians in unity. So far as any of us can honestly understand the Gospel there are real divisions in our beliefs about man and God and history; it is with these things that ecumenism is concerned. The division of the church has had, in a sense, a positive side; out of this evil God has brought the seeds of good. In isolation from each other each of the churches has developed real insights into the Gospel which, it seems likely, they would never have achieved without the separation. The task of ecumenical dialogue is to bring these insights together. It is no mere matter of good will and friendship, it is a matter of allowing the Holy Spirit to work in us to create a new kind of Christian living and Christian thinking within which all these insights will find their fulfilment. In the meantime our divided eucharist should remain as a confession of our guilt, of our lack of response to the Spirit, and as a challenge to amendment.

H. Mc. C.