

In recent weeks and especially during the Unity Octave, we have had a good many instances of Roman Catholic priests accepting invitations to preach in the pulpits of other Christian Churches. Fr Thomas Corbishley's sermon in Westminster Abbey was, through the good offices of Mr Paisley, the best publicised but it was one amongst many. This kind of thing, we say rather complacently, would have been inconceivable twenty years ago. As a matter of fact this is not quite true; Fr Vincent McNabb, for example, quite frequently preached in Free Church pulpits many years ago and there have been other examples. Nevertheless it is a new thing that the custom should be so widespread and should be officially and publicly welcomed.

Another thing we might notice is that the newspapers report no single case this year of any Anglican priest or Free Church minister being invited to preach in a Roman Catholic pulpit. Of course there have been a few cases but they have been unofficial and unadvertised. So far as taking the initiative is concerned in what seems like an ecumenical gesture, the Catholic Church in England has no cause to congratulate herself on any advance since the Council. The most that can be said is that other Churches now feel they can invite us without risking a rebuff.

This is not, of course, the first year that such invitations have been issued, but in the past the English Bishops have not, generally speaking, given priests permission to accept. The reason usually given hitherto for such refusal was that it would be discourteous to accept an invitation that could not be reciprocated. The Bishops, in fact, correctly foresaw the present situation and they thought it would be intolerable. They were quite right; it is intolerable. Quite apart from his own delicacy of feeling, a man so acutely sensitive to public opinion as Cardinal Heenan cannot but be embarrassed by the present state of affairs.

Now this is an excellent thing. It is a sign that we are beginning to face the realities of ecumenism. Catholics have been so abominably rude to other Christians in the past that it is easy for us to imagine that ecumenism means no more than a new and unfamiliar good manners. Recent incidents at the Mansion House in Dublin suggest that we have quite a long way to go in the elementary matter of sheer courtesy but when this has been achieved ecumenism may still have

to begin. Ecumenism does not consist in tolerance and politeness, it is a matter of new thinking and prayer and decision about Christ's Church.

Do we or do we not think that an Anglican priest is an appropriate minister of the word in a Catholic church? In the past (in spite of St Paul's injunction to preach the word in season and out of season) the English Bishops have declined Anglican invitations in order to avoid facing this question. That was an unsatisfactory state of affairs. If this year invitations had been immediately reciprocated the whole thing might have been treated as a mere exchange of courtesies. That would have been perhaps even less satisfactory. As it is we have to make real decisions about our beliefs. This is awkward, embarrassing and a very good thing.

From now on it will be clear that if next year we invite other Christian ministers to preach it will be because of a genuine theological decision and no mere matter of politeness; we have shown that we can bear to be thought of as discourteous. Again, if there are no invitations, this too will be recognised not as inertia but as a calculated statement of position.

'In the name of the whole hierarchy of England and Wales, we readily declare our intention of doing everything short of denying our faith to bring about the union of Christians.' These words of Cardinal Heenan show that if our pulpits next year remain closed to other Christians it will be because in his opinion to open them would be to deny our faith. Such an opinion (though we do not share it) would not be obviously wrong or even obviously unecumenical. Theological developments in the Catholic Church in our time have laid increasing stress on the ministry of the word as a priestly function interpenetrating the ministry of the sacrament. To acknowledge a man as preacher is in some sense to acknowledge him as priest. To us it seems that the Council's recognition of some other Christian communities as genuine Churches implies a recognition of a priesthood of some kind in their ministers – though not necessarily a ministry of the sacrament. If this is so then they may be welcomed, by the Bishop's invitation, as ministers of the word in Catholic pulpits.

If invitations are issued next year which can be seen as considered statements of this position, then the embarrassment of waiting a while to think it out will have been well worth while.

H. Mc. C.