

into words and ideas that go home to the minds and hearts of the non-Catholic biblical theologians. The second level at which this ecumenical problem could be tackled is at the university student level; and this needs training too. It could be done on the working lines of the Catholic Evidence Guild, where theologically competent instructors give courses to students who can thus qualify as speakers. The instructions would be in a theology, at a level less deep than that of the theological schools, which is integrated into the ideas and thought-forms familiar to non-Catholic Christians of different allegiances. In this way Catholics and non-Catholics might learn to exchange ideas and in the process to prepare the ground for the growth of understanding and unity in the true faith. This together with constant and urgent prayer for the unity of all Christians is work in which we can all share, priests and laity alike.

If we are meant to see the hand of God in this great movement towards Christian unity, and surely we are, then we must also be convinced that God's will must be carried out by the co-operation of us his human agents. Our responsibility under God for the future is very great indeed.



### THE PILGRIM CHURCH<sup>1</sup>

**T**WO years ago we considered the necessity of the one Church and saw it as alone the way which leads to blessedness. Last year we developed the idea to further conclusions, discussing the missionary task of the Catholic Church and of Catholics among other Christians. And in both sermons I pointed out more than once that for all the Catholic Church's unique position, we should not overlook its earthly configuration and human imperfection, and on that account the proper attitude for Catholics in present-day ecumenical discussions is one of humility, penance and a readiness to learn.

Today we will focus our attention on this, and consider the

<sup>1</sup> On January 17th, 1957, on the occasion of the Unity Octave, the then Bishop of Würzburg, Julius Döpfner, newly appointed to the See of Berlin, preached on the Church in history; what is permanent in her and what transient; matters which are often not clearly understood by non-Catholic Christians, who thus take offence where there is no need to. The sermon appeared in *Herder—Korrespondenz* March, 1957 and is translated by Ruth M. Bethell.

human side of the Church. We are still indeed dealing with the Church that issues from our Lord and rests in him, but here on earth, as the Church of humankind, it is on a pilgrimage with our Lord as its goal. We are looking, in fact, at Christ's Church as it goes forward on its journey through time.

We will take three points which stress the divine element in the Church, together with three points which tend to complicate ecumenical discussion because they lay the Church open to the charge of claiming unjustifiable perfection, and even of presumption towards God. Let us take as introduction a passage from the second Epistle to the Corinthians: 'We have a treasure, then, in our keeping, but its shell is of perishable earthenware; it must be God, and not anything in ourselves, that gives it its sovereign power.'

#### I. CHRIST LIVING ON

We call the Church 'Christ living on' in time. Protestant theologians have a number of objections to this turn of phrase. They see it as a diminishing of the incomparable person of Christ and his unique work, and fear a divinization of the Church. Let us examine this view.

There is no doubt that the idea of the Church as human-divine is given us by Scripture itself, where the Church is called the Body of Christ. That deeply significant image of the intimate union of Christians as one body of which Christ is the head (cf. I Cor. 12, 27; Rom. 12, 5) is explicitly related to the Church in the first Epistle to the Corinthians (12, 12-13). In the epistles written in prison the idea is still further developed. In Colossians 1, 18, we read, 'He too is that head whose body is the Church'. The Son of God, who took on human nature in the Incarnation, links himself, as the second Adam, to men and women who through faith and baptism are bound to him, and with them together composes the Church. The self-abasement of God, already realized in the Incarnation, is made still more evident in this mysterious union of Christ as head, with the members of the Church. The Church Fathers, and particularly St Augustine, are fond of regarding the Church as the 'totus Christus', the whole Christ, composed of head and members.

But it remains extremely important that what is divine and what is human in the Church should be 'inseparable but distinct', as the Council of Chalcedon says of Christ himself. We may not

on any account diminish Christ's presence and constant action within the Church, but on the other hand we must never forget that he acts through men and women who remain free persons, and who are as such subject to the limitations of human action and of sin.

Through the ruling of his Spirit, Christ is the one invisible Lord of the Church, but he lives in men and women and directs it through those who carry on the work of his own chosen Apostles. Christ in his Church bestows the grace of his unique redeeming death, but he does it in earthly sacramental signs and through human instrumentality.

And though the Church is ruled by its transcendent risen Lord it has still not reached its goal, and on its earthly pilgrimage it bears the features of its Lord's suffering and humiliation, though carried on the wings of that hope of which the Spirit is earnest. Therefore whenever the Church is discussed, great care must be taken to discover to what degree God's power is really there, making it impossible for the gates of hell to overthrow it, and to what degree its human form, the 'perishable earthenware', is uppermost.

And now we will look at those basic considerations in the light of two other points.

## II. THE INFALLIBLE CHURCH

The infallibility of the Church is rejected with particular vehemence by the Protestants. The Church, they say, places itself above God's word, turns itself into a Church of perfection, and forgets it is meant to be a pilgrim still seeking its goal.

Let us briefly sum up the real meaning of the infallibility of the Church. In Scripture it is clear that Christ commissioned the apostles and their successors to preach his word, that is, the gospel he brought from the Father (Matt. 28, 18-19). And what he told them is explicitly relevant to the human-divine view of the Church as he intended it: 'He who listens to you, listens to me' (Luke 10, 16). And to enable them to carry out their commission, Christ promised the Spirit of Truth to the Church's teachers and preachers: 'The Holy Spirit, whom the Father will send on my account, will in his turn make everything plain, and recall to your minds everything I have said to you' (John 14, 27). It was the clear purport of Scripture and the evidence the Church gave

of itself from early post-apostolic times that originated the article of faith concerning infallibility, which is of course far more stringently delimited than many non-Catholic theologians and Church leaders believe. Indeed, the relevant clause in the catechism reads like an echo of the scriptural promise of the Holy Spirit: 'When Pope and bishops pronounce on a point of faith, they are infallible because Christ preserves his Church from error through the Holy Spirit'. The Pope speaks with the infallibility of Peter's See only 'when he speaks *ex cathedra*, that is, when in the exercise of his function as Pastor and Teacher of all Christians, empowered by his supreme apostolic authority, he declares that a certain doctrine affecting faith and morals is to be believed by the whole Church' (*Vat. Con. Denziger* 1839). And it is relatively seldom that he does so.

Here the supremacy of God's power is realized in the Church, though by means of the 'perishable earthenware' of the pilgrim Church. This is evident in the whole conduct of the discussion leading to a definition of infallibility. From the Protestant side, all too often the not-altogether seemly deliberations of the Vatican Council have been decried, with regret, indignation or malice as the case might be. But in the way the carefully delimited formulation of papal infallibility eventually emerges from the clash of biased views and the all-too-human situation, surely acknowledgment is due to the assistance our Lord promised? And when, as our present Holy Father has done repeatedly, the Pope expressly requests the theologians to continue their scrutiny of certain questions to do with faith, it is for the very reason that the Church is not above God's word but is concerned in all humility and earnestness, for the right understanding of revelation.

The Church's articles of faith, once formulated, are clothed in earthly raiment. The Church expounds the revelation Christ entrusted to it in human language. Of course the Spirit of Truth directs its teachers, so that God's word shall not be distorted, but no article of faith can entirely and exhaustively reflect the mystery of revelation. Hence the possibility of an increasing understanding of God's word in the Church, and of a development of dogma. It is often patent how the teaching Church has to stress one side or another of the truth of revelation according to the errors it has to deal with, in a later period filling out the

work begun in answer to a given challenge, and thus penetrating the fullness of the truth more and more deeply and making it increasingly accessible. What the Apostle said is true even of the infallible Church: 'At present, we are looking at a confused reflection in a mirror' (1 Cor. 12, 12).

It is thus possible that in theological thought and in the prevalent attitude of men to their faith in a given period, parts of revelation are left in the background; not denied, but to some extent neglected. And that is why, for all his submission to the teaching Church, taking part in ecumenical meetings is a stimulating and fruitful experience for the Catholic Christian as well as for his Protestant brother. We do not stand among other Christians as men complete and perfect. In fact we openly and thankfully admit that we owe to Protestant theologians views which we would not care to be without. True, the *Instructio* of the Holy Office does say, in regard to converts, 'Things must not be presented in such a way that the impression is given them that by entering the Church they conferred on it something essential that it hitherto lacked'. This statement, which has often caused offence, must be properly understood. Converts have nothing to contribute to the integral and essential body of the truth, but they can greatly enrich the Church by bringing into it an experienced and mature attitude to truth, as the example of great converts demonstrates.

We cannot but be dismayed when representatives of the Church's teaching office, who should be quintessential Catholics, lapse into a rigid narrow-mindedness and make unjustifiable claims of infallibility. That attitude has nothing whatever to do with the true nature of the Church, but is rather due to a flaw in the 'perishable earthenware'.

### III. THE HOLY CHURCH

This description of it brings us right inside the human-divine structure of the Church. But let us allow the Holy Father to describe the Church to us: 'Without fault our venerable Mother shines forth in her sacraments, by means of which she brings her children to life and nourishes them, in the faith which she preserves untainted through all times, in her holy laws through which all are subject to her, and in the evangelical counsels which she urges all to observe, and finally in the heavenly gifts and graces through which she brings forth an increasing flow, an innumerable host

of martyrs, virgins and confessors' (*Enc. Mystici Corporis*). But the Church is holy because Christ is present in it and fills it with his Spirit, and because 'it must be God, and not anything in ourselves, that gives it its sovereign power'—to quote our initial text. But here, too, the law of the 'perishable earthenware' holds good.

The sanctifying power of the Church works in earthly fashion. Let us conclude our quotation from Pius XII's Encyclical by making sure we are quite clear about that. The Encyclical is about the sacraments, or more generally, the liturgy. All through the centuries the Church is concerned to find the most appropriate form for presenting Christ's saving grace and making it accessible to us. That a certain rigidity set in, that given forms were in need of renewal, is tacitly recognized in the decree for the reform of the Holy Week liturgy, for instance, and this admission forms the basis of the present liturgical revival. Whoever is acquainted with the whole history of Catholic piety knows how much importance has always been attached to finding the right relation between Word and Sacrament, between liturgical and personal piety, and knows, too, how, precisely on the eve of the great division in the faith of the western world, the prevalence of narrow-mindedness and abuses greatly weighed upon men's consciences.

The Holy Father speaks of the 'holy laws' of the Church. The Church's ordinances deserve such a title, for they are there for the supreme purpose of providing holy members for the Body of which Christ is the head. But no Catholic capable of detached judgment will fail to observe that tension may exist between the authority of the pastoral office and the freedom and judgment of the faithful, that a number of ecclesiastical laws have temporal limitations, and that even good laws may be given all-too-rigid and timid application.

The evangelical counsels are also mentioned. The degree to which the Orders grew out of the very spirit of the Gospel itself is stressed today particularly by Protestant Christians, sometimes with striking urgency. But we also know, and again today in particular, how the Church is ever seeking for a proper balance between the sanctity of those adhering to the evangelical counsels and the sanctity of Christians who live in the world, and how it never ceases from its deep concern lest the works of justification deteriorate into justification-works.

At all events it is true that 'without fault our most venerable Mother Church shines forth', but equally valid is Bishop Keppeler's remark that 'from the very beginning, an urge to reform was native to the Church'. On that account the Shepherds of the Church, while keeping an open mind towards the searching activities of the ecumenical movement, are required to ensure that the holiness of Christ's Church is powerfully apparent to all who call upon the name of the Lord. Our Christian brethren ought to be able to feel that their yearning for Christ's justifying grace, and all the working of the Holy Spirit that we observe and reverence in them, can find a home in the Catholic Church, and indeed, reach fulfilment there.

Holy Church strives with all its might for sinful men and women. The Church is dependent on its human officers and members; men and women exposed to temptation and liable to sin. And hence the Church's inherent holiness is often veiled and obscured by the all-too-evident frailty of those who owe it allegiance. But lapses from the Church, and all divisions in Christendom, are always in some way connected (though not entirely so) with sin and slackness within the Church. We are still deeply moved when we read of how, in the sixteenth century, in the first years of the troubles over the faith, Pope Hadrian the Sixth gave his delegate at the Diet of Nürnberg (1522-23) a special message: 'You shall say that we freely admit it: God allows this persecution of his Church to occur on account of men, and particularly on account of the sins of priests and prelates. . . . Therefore we must all give God the honour and humble ourselves before him.'

All of us should seek in the Holy Father's Intention for the Unity Octave in January (1957) how this can be applied to the ecumenical question: 'That all Catholics may through prayer and the example of their lives facilitate the return to the Church of the separated Christians'. There we have the word 'return' which offends so many people. Nevertheless, this 'hard word' is imperative, owing to the immutability of what our faith tells us about the one true Church of Christ. However, the decisive point is, how we set about promoting a return. We have no right to be self-righteous or pompous about it, like the elder brother in the parable of the Prodigal Son, taking up our stance at the door of the Church and exhorting people to return, for all of us are

in need of the Father's mercy. Of course we can take a happy, childlike pride in our holy Mother Church, and a Catholic attitude to life ought to be clearly evident in us. But in regard to separated Christians we are called to witness by means of a life imbued with the spirit of humble penance and comprehending love.

It is comprehending love that is most needed, with a truly Catholic breadth of vision endeavouring to appreciate and make our appeal to the abundant manifestations of truly Christian living outside the Church. We ought to show that it is precisely on account of our firm roots in the Church and our obedience to her pastors that we live a life uniting personal piety and an open-minded and informed attitude to the world at large, Catholic clarity of thought and kindly comprehension. We should also observe that the Holy Father's Intention is deliberately modest in scope: 'to facilitate the return'. Any individual approach to the Church is a matter for God's decrees and God's grace, and large-scale reunion still more so. All we can do is to remove obstacles with the same patience which God shows in bearing with his torn and divided Christendom.

And now we come to the prayer at the beginning of the Intention. May the considerations I have put before you act as a call to prayer. In this World Octave of Prayer let us enquire of ourselves again, whether reunion in the faith forms a constant, urgent object of our own personal prayer. Pray, brethren, that the Lord will remove the scandal of division from his Christendom; pray that all of us together, through a spirit of love and a life of truth, may diminish this scandal.

As you know, dear people of Würzburg, during all the years that I have been privileged to be your bishop I have been deeply concerned with the question of reunion. Now, in obedience to the Holy Father, I am going to a completely 'diaspora' diocese, where a truly ecumenical attitude is, if possible, even more necessary. And thus my request to you in my last sermon of the Octave of Prayer, is as it were a legacy from your departing bishop: pull your weight with all your strength and all your love, through prayer and works, in the cause of the reunion of separated Christians in the one Church of Jesus Christ. Amen.