

Catholic Approaches to the Problem of Unity

ABBE LOUIS O'NEILL

Translated by

W. F. BUTCHER

TRANSLATOR'S NOTE: Father Louis O'Neill is assistant-chaplain in the Faculties of Commerce, Forestry and Surveying, and Science, at Laval University, Quebec, and chaplain to the organisation of Catholic Action in Laval University. This article appeared in the March, 1955, number of *La Revue Eucharistique du Clergé*, published in Montreal. It was written for the Roman Catholic priesthood of the Province of Quebec, with no thought of publication among Protestants. Father O'Neill has seen and approved of this translation and its printing.

A happy change has come about in the past few years in the way of considering the difficulties of bringing together divided bodies of Christians. We have left far behind us the period of the wars of religion and the dragonnades. Doubtless there are still unhappy incidents, and there still exist unjust conditions which throw a shade across the scene, but it seems to us accurate to say that these belong on the whole to a time which has passed. The conflicts which still take place between Catholics and Protestants in certain parts of our country, concerning the school question, for instance, must appear to some of us to be normal. Yet we must not attach to these incidents an exaggerated importance, and so falsify our understanding of the real state of things. We are here disregarding the secular aspects of such questions as nationality and language. These are separate matters.

It is undeniable that the need to unite before the rise of materialist forces, Marxism in particular, has contributed very much to the drawing together of those who call themselves Christians. Once more God brings good out of evil. It is this growing danger which obliges believers to set aside many resentments and long-held prejudices in order to consider the situation with new eyes, with a true desire for objectivity.

It is important to remark that we are putting ourselves on the plane of life, not on the doctrinal level, where no compromise is possible. Loyalty towards our faith protects us against the type of pan-Christianity denounced by Pius XI.¹ Moreover, it would be a poor service to our Protestant friends if we gave them the impression that we are ready to compromise on principles. But . . . that does not mean that we have to content ourselves with a gracious attitude, simply waiting until the heretics come to us and confess their errors. Such a position does not consider the fulness of the problem and the urgency of more effective solutions.

The fighting approach, while having a certain positive value, is, in our

opinion, not only out-of-date, but even sometimes harmful. It is inconceivable that a discussion should still be based more or less slavishly on patterns inspired by John of St. Thomas. For doctrine, yes. There this great theologian can render immense services. The long chapters on the First Debate and the Treatise on the Sovereign Pontiff keep their whole value.² But it is otherwise with the psychological attitude adopted and the vocabulary used. Many educators do not hesitate nowadays to question the traditional methods of apologetic teaching, and that even in our own circles, so far hardly reputed to be revolutionary. We think this is a sign of the times. It seems to have been found that the mind of modern man, while thirsty for the same truths, wishes them to be presented in a context which takes heed of present needs and of the circumstances of our own time.

A fruitful approach, to help those who wish to understand our beliefs, is that of such centres of information as the Inquiry Forum.³ It meets the needs of non-Catholic individuals, no matter to what group they belong. It serves as a point of reference always at the disposal of one who is being touched by a special grace of conversion. It is insufficient, but it would not be fitting to undervalue the immense services which it is now rendering.

With the friendly approach, such as Brotherhood Week, and other movements of the type, we meet a rather new method. People with differing beliefs meet with the idea of knowing and understanding one another better, and trying as much as possible to break down the barriers which separate them, especially the psychological ones. In certain movements, approaches are readily made to religious subjects, such as the different methods of prayer in each of the groups, or again the systems used in the religious education of children. Exchanges are made between members of different religious bodies. The official neutrality of social clubs is avoided. There is rather the principle of a sort of pluralism which guides the procedure of the whole.

This last attitude seems to us to show some progress, on the condition that the Catholic participants are very well prepared for such meetings, which is far from always being the case. On the other hand, it cannot be denied that it is difficult enough to avoid merely social and superficial encounters. Where it has been tried, however, this approach has made it possible to enter into more profound and serious relationships, continued under other circumstances.

At a level higher than the foregoing are to be placed efforts of the type of the European ecumenical movements, such as those in which Father Congar has taken an active part. One could name also Fathers Dumont, Hamer, and so on. In this approach, as in the former one, it is not, we would dare to say, a matter of converting one another, but of drawing nearer together. A movement of convergence is attempted by an honest effort to grasp the positions of the others, as they themselves understand them. Those taking part try to speak the same language so as to distinguish real differences from verbal ones. The aim is to prepare the ways of the

Spirit for Him who makes unity, their intelligences having been better disposed to receive His influence.

It would be incorrect to say that Catholics have not on their side to make an effort, under the pretext that they already possess the truth. Such a position seems to us too optimistic. There is a distinction between having received the truth and truly possessing it, and similarly, between possessing it and living it. Each of us must "obey the truth in order to come to the light". The infallible faith of the Church does not make up for one's own. One can believe exactly according to the words and be among those who will not have faith when the Son of Man shall return to the earth. The faith which I have received I must win. I must discover it vitally. And in this effort to win it, and in the self-examination which such an effort implies, I shall discover perhaps that this and that point of doctrine to which I adhere correctly according to the wording expresses itself in part in individual notions or attitudes of life that do something to falsify the picture and are an obstacle to the true faith for those who wish to draw near to us. That is why the work of research and of understanding faces the Catholic too. The approach toward unity implies a bilateral movement. Thus we must go over again, one by one, certain points of doctrine where we differ in opinion. In this way we show a sincere devotion to the truth, which is one. Indeed Protestants are surprised at the lack of intellectual research which marks many Catholic, and even ecclesiastical, circles. What do we mean then, they ask, by devotion to truth? Or, again, we have a high notion of human freedom; that is why we refuse certain Protestant positions concerning a too absolutist idea of predestination. Yet our way of expressing freedom, for example in the case of totalitarian Christian political structures, is a phenomenon which baffles them. The first, they say, who gave great importance to human freedom is none other than Christ. To take a further example, we assert against them the high spiritual meaning of sensible signs, and yet cases are not rare of marked sliding in Catholic countries towards a ritualism which repels them, sometimes with good reason. For in many cases the repugnance shown is often enough legitimate, and in their eyes is based on truth. We could multiply examples to show that we must not hastily deduce that we express in our lives that which we possess on the plane of principle. We cannot here refuse self-examination.

Such relationships presuppose respect for the belief of the other man, and confidence in his sincerity. They require also such love for the truth that one will not hesitate to recognise it wherever it is found, even if partial or disfigured. All truth belongs to us. We must remember the warning of St. Augustine: "Men would never attach themselves to an erroneous doctrine if a fragment of truth were not there." Besides, as Father Mersch notes, "Truth and error are not separated by an intermediate zone which is neither one nor the other, and which it would not be wise to visit. They touch, on the contrary, all along the line: truth goes as far as error, quite as far as error, shutting it out: to stop too soon, should this be to withdraw

before error, would be to fall into error, would be saying falsely that which is still true."⁴

Traditional apologetics has not sufficiently accustomed us to consider from this angle the relationships of Christians. Among ourselves, a negative position has easily predominated because of the parallel political and racial attitudes which have reinforced it. Thus we have brought about the sociological phenomenon of the fortress-Church, the Catholic preserve, rich in the traditional Christian values, but so closely tied to its ethnic context that it is hindered at present, or so it seems, from its mission of outreach.

The ecumenical approach which we will call modern, if the word can be used without mistrust, is perfectly justified both theologically and historically. Carried out according to the rules set by the Church,⁵ it must attract us. The Catholic more than any other, precisely because he believes that he possesses the essentials of the Revelation and not only parts of its gifts, must engage confidently in such activity. He possesses the principles which assure him of light and guide him in the way. Further, he must have confidence in the Holy Spirit. Sometimes one has the impression that some Catholics mistrust the Holy Spirit, above all when He seems to suggest new things!

Such work doubtless requires discretion, humility—and study! These contacts are a rare stimulant to make any priest recover the desire to be a theologian, if he has lost it. The example of intellectual enquiry and of the spirit of toil shown by some ministers could easily serve as a lesson for us. This comfort in the possession of the truth which moves us to dispense with study and with the need of rethinking is dangerous. Let us beware of it. The Lord perhaps prefers anguished seeking to mildewed possession. "He who is no longer worried, is in danger", said Newman. When, with tense spirit and anxious eyes, three kings from the Orient left Jerusalem and turned their steps toward Bethlehem, a passer-by might have laughed a little at their distress and had pity on men who gave themselves such trouble. Nevertheless it was this anxiety which enabled them to find Him who is Peace.

NOTES

1. Encyclical *Mortalium Animos*, 6 January, 1928.
2. The two treatises are presented together in the excellent edition Gagné-Mathieu, Quebec, 1947. (Presses Universitaires Laval).
3. *The Inquiry Forum*, a centre of information and instruction for future converts, has been organized at Montreal under the direction of the Rev. Father Beaubien, S.J.
4. E. Mersch, S.J.: *La théologie du Corps Mystique*, Vol. I, p. 93. (Ed. 1944)
5. See *Instructions of the Sacred Congregation of the Holy Office concerning the Ecumenical Movement*, 20 December, 1949.