

# **The Unity of Christians: The Vision of Paul Couturier**

**A Special Edition of *The Messenger of the Catholic League*  
October 2003**

## **Foreword to the First Edition**

Seventy years ago in 1933, an unknown schoolmaster priest had come back from a visit to the Monks of Unity at Amay-sur-Meuse, determined to change the nature of prayer for Unity in his home, the city of Lyon. In fact, he brought in a second spring for what he was to call 'the Week of Universal Prayer for the Unity of Christians'. When he died twenty years later, the Week of Prayer, for unity in Christ 'according to his will, according to his means', had spread throughout the Catholic world and its genius of spiritual friendship was warmly taken up by the Christians of the Eastern Churches, by Anglicans, Lutherans and in the Reformed Churches. Paul Couturier's vision of a firmly 'spiritual ecumenism' was even recognised as a sign of the one humanity binding all children of the one God by his Muslim, Hindu, Buddhist and Jewish friends, who also saw something remarkable in this devoted priest of Jesus Christ. At his funeral fifty years ago in March 1953, his own archbishop declared him an apostle and so much of his spirit and vision would later find a supreme expression in the Second Vatican Council's Decree on Ecumenism, *Unitatis Redintegratio*. Indeed the early years and nurture of the World Council of Churches, the famous Taizé community, the reconsidered attitude to non-Roman Catholic Christians - especially the Orthodox Churches of the East - were deeply inspired with his call to grow together in holiness, to uncover that unity of the Church as it is in God's presence in the kingdom of heaven itself, where 'the walls of separation do not rise'. For to converge on and in Christ, is to converge with one another. It is to embrace Christ's prayer that we all be one, so that the world may believe.

Yet, fifty years after the Abbé died, many of those who had direct experience of his ideals and put them into practice have themselves passed on, and there is less enthusiasm for the annual joint service and the Week of Prayer in January. So the talks collected in this book were given at two conferences held in 2003 to reawaken interest in Couturier's dedication above all to a *spiritual* ecumenism. They emphasise the prayer at the heart of all our ecumenical thinking and activity, Couturier's conviction that Unity is the sovereign work of God's own attraction to his creation, notwithstanding our efforts to negotiate or resist it. Thus the talks rekindle his sense of urgency that prayer for unity is vital to the Church's mission to the world and the service of all its people in the name of the one Christ.

The first conference took place on March 22nd at Westminster Cathedral, two days before the anniversary of his death was commemorated at the Sung Mass. Thus 64 years after Cardinal Hinsley declined to permit Couturier a third visit to the Anglicans in 1939, Cardinal Murphy O'Connor warmly welcomed the conference and those attending the commemorative celebration of Mass. The second took place June 27th-29th at Nazareth, the English Convent in Brugge, where the sisters have played an active role in fostering international ecumenical good will, not only since Vatican II but also through their witness over many centuries.

The range of subjects is deliberately broad. They embrace Paul Couturier's life and formative influences; how his ideas correspond with aspects of Catholic, Anglican, Methodist and Eastern Orthodox history; the role of the Anglican Papalists in his encounters with Anglicanism; the story of some Anglican religious communities; the story of the Monks of Unity at the beginning, as well as that of Chemin Neuf, a new community with an ecumenical vocation for the present day; right through to contemporary experience in the spiritual life of the local churches, from A Rocha's Evangelical ecumenical approach to Stamford Hill's warm Catholic-Anglican-Methodist (and others) collaboration. Finally, we take a fresh look at the Week of Prayer and its significance of Unity for the Church's present and future.

I should like to record my thanks to Father Brooke Lunn and the Catholic League who have invited me to publish the talks as a Special Edition of the Messenger. Nowadays an ecumenical group, the League's founders were a small group of Anglicans who believed passionately in unity with the See of Peter. Despite being on their Church's margins, their role first in supporting the Malines Conversations and then in bringing the Abbé Couturier to England, both of which led to so much more, shows an abiding influence out of all proportion to their numbers. This is a legacy which deserves to be revalued and acknowledged by all the Churches with considerable gratitude.

A word of acknowledgement is also due to the late Geoffrey Wright, to the Abbé Pierre Parré, a great ecumenical mentor in Belgium, and to Father Michael Seed SA for inspiring the recovery of Paul Couturier's vision for the Unity of Christians. I also thank all the speakers and participants at the two conferences, especially for their agreement for their papers to be published as a permanent record, and the active support in the year's events by the Society for Ecumenical Studies and the Ecumenical Society of the Blessed Virgin Mary.

I greatly appreciate the warm welcome at Westminster of HE Cardinal Murphy O'Connor, Bishop Alan Hopes, Mgr Mark Langham and Father Richard Andrew; and, in Brugge, of Sister Mary Aline and all the Augustinian community at the English Convent. Finally, I am indebted to Elizabeth Storer and Juliette Tallen for their great practical assistance, and to the support throughout this project of the Jerusalem Trust.

Mark Woodruff  
September 1, 2003

## **Foreword to the Second Edition**

Unitas, the Catholic League for the Unity of Christians, is delighted to issue a fresh edition of their celebration of Spiritual Ecumenism and the life and work of Paul Couturier on the occasion of the International Colloquium, 'Catholic Learning: Explorations in Receptive Ecumenism', in honour of H.E. Walter Cardinal Kasper, President of the Pontifical Council for Promoting Christian Unity, as he receives the honorary Doctorate of Divinity in the University of Durham on 12th January 2006.

Mark Woodruff  
November 1, 2005