

The Unity of Christians: The Vision of Paul Couturier

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

I

The Abbé Paul Couturier, Pioneer of Spiritual Ecumenism

Sister Teresa Burke CP

Paul Couturier was born on 29th July 1881, over 120 years ago, into a very devout Catholic family in Lyon, France, the great city where in 1274 the divisions between East and West had for a time been healed. Much of his early childhood, from 1884 to 1893, was spent in Algiers, where the worlds of North African Muslims and European Christians faced each other culturally, politically and even spiritually. At school he was studious, rather introspective and very respectful during prayer. At the age of nineteen he decided to study for the priesthood and was ordained on 9th June 1906 in the Cathedral of St Jean at Lyon, Primatial Church of the Gauls, near the site of the forum of the great Roman metropolis of the west, where St Irenaeus the bishop, disciple of St Polycarp, himself a disciple of the Beloved Disciple and the Virgin herself, had brought the apostolic preaching of the Fourth Evangelist. It was into the *Société de St Irénée*, a diocesan association of mission and teaching priests, that he was ordained. He then studied for a degree in Mathematics and Physical Sciences, which served to develop precision of mind and judgment alongside his profound sense of the power of prayer. His teaching career spanned a period of over forty years in Lyon (at the *Collège des Chartreux*, the Society's school in Lyon's former Carthusian monastery); but his biographer, friend and co-worker, Father Geoffrey Curtis (of the Anglican Community of the Resurrection at Mirfield in Yorkshire) recalled that he

‘was not a successful schoolmaster ... in spite of being conscientious, accurate, devoted, thorough, he could never acquire the tricks of the trade ... but as he was clearly as little cut out for parochial or any other regular pastoral ministry, under

obedience, he continued faithfully to carry this strangely ill-fitting cross for the rest of his life' (nearly forty years).

He never became a parish priest, but the profoundly spiritual dimension of his personality earned the greatest respect. 'The tones of his voice saying the hymn, *Veni Creator Spiritus*, his transparent holiness, were never forgotten'. One of his favorite books, appealing to both his spiritual awareness and his scientific cast of mind, was *Le Milieu Divin* by the Jesuit Pierre Teilhard de Chardin; it was not published until both had died, but he often made handwritten copies of special passages which he gave to pupils and friends.

But it was one of the tragic events of history which revealed to him in a very direct way the problems of understanding and relating to those from whom we differ in language, culture and creed. This event was the Soviet Revolution of 1917. After the telling effects of an Ignatian retreat, in 1923 Abbé Couturier took an active part in caring for Russian refugees who had poured into Lyon - about ten thousand of them. He arduously set about finding 'ways and means' of providing them with food, shelter, clothing money and education - despite the insuperable barriers of language, culture and creed. He made every effort to get to know the Russian priests - some of whom were Catholics of Eastern rite - their liturgy and the spiritual riches of Eastern Orthodoxy. Metropolitan Platon of Kiev's saying, that 'the walls of separation do not rise as far as heaven', affected him deeply and it was to become a principle of his future ecumenical outlook.

Another important formative influence was a retreat he made at a Benedictine Abbey at Amay-sur-Meuse in Belgium in 1932. This Abbey had been established in 1925 by Dom Lambert Beauduin, a pioneer of the Liturgical Movement, to renew the conduct and spirituality of worship, at the express request of Pope Pius XI. It was dedicated to prayer for Christian Unity, especially for growth in understanding between East and West, and the monks were known as the 'Monks of Unity'. The foundation was later moved to its present home at Chevetogne. During his stay at Amay (though by then Beauduin had been exiled, owing to somewhat unjust official suspicion over his close contacts with non-Catholics), Couturier gained first hand information about the Malines Conversations (1921-1926) between Lord Halifax with his five Anglican companions and Cardinal Mercier with his five Catholic companions, including Abbé Fernand Portal and, as an adviser, Dom Lambert Beauduin. The *Testament* of Cardinal Mercier so impressed him that he copied it out and

used it many times in dialogue for Christian Unity. One quotation is so well known, but it always bears repetition:

‘In order to be united, it is necessary to love another; in order to love one another it is necessary to know one another; in order to know one another we must go to meet one another.’

Fr Curtis wrote, ‘These challenging words sank deeply into his heart as did the memory of the spirit of the Benedictine Monks of Unity - the contemplative peace of their Monastery with its Latin and Byzantine Chapels and Liturgies’. Here he met the young Dominican priest, Fr Yves Congar (one day to be a leading light among the advisers at Vatican II), whose theological expertise he greatly admired in future years, thought their temperaments and outlooks were so different that at first they had clear misgivings about each other. Equally Fr Congar respected the spiritual depth of Fr Couturier and described him as ‘the Father of Spiritual Ecumenism’, complementing Congar's own work of ‘intellectual ecumenism’ (then already in hand: see Y.M.J. Congar OP, *Chrétiens désunis*, Paris, Éditions du Cerf, 1937). It was here too that he learned about the January Octave of Prayer for Christian Unity, founded by two Anglican clergymen Paul Wattson and Spencer Jones in 1908 as the Church Unity Octave, with its appeal for the reunion of all Christendom around the see of Peter. He resolved to continue to pray and to work for Christian Unity and to promote the January Octave of Prayer. As if to forge closer links with the Benedictines and their work for Unity, he became an Oblate of their Monastery a year later, in August 1933, adopting the name Benoit-Irénée in honour of the two spiritual families to which he belonged. (Irénée became his ‘pen name’ ever after.)

On his return to Lyon in the Autumn of 1932, he was determined to introduce the January Octave of Prayer to his native city and hopefully from there to other parts of France. He entered into correspondence with the authors of the Octave, Fr Paul Wattson in New York (founder of the Society of the Atonement, an Anglican Franciscan order in Graymoor, New York, which was collectively received into the Catholic Church soon after the Octave was founded in 1908 and has dedicated itself ever since to work for Unity, the Octave having received Pope St Pius X's approval in 1909 and then extension by Benedict XV to the whole Catholic Church in 1916) and Fr Spencer Jones, Anglican vicar of Moreton-in-Marsh, as

well as with other theologians and Anglican friends (Fr Jones was a relative of John Keble and had known both John Henry Newman and Dr Edward Pusey personally).

The expressed objective of the Wattson/Jones Octave was prayer for a return of all Christians to Rome. While he would never depart from the active hope that in achieving Unity all Christians would cease to be separate from the Holy See, Couturier was realising that prayer for Unity was unlikely to make a great difference to the current separation of great groups of Christians by trying to attract converts to Catholicism. Lyon was a very cosmopolitan city - a centre of trade and home to Catholics, Protestants, Greek and Russian Orthodox - it made no sense to expect everyone to be the same. Abbé Couturier spent long hours daily contemplating chapter 17 of Saint John's Gospel. This led him to the conclusion that 'the wording of the Wattson/Jones Octave would have to be broadened and decentralised.' He feared that in its current form it was defeating its own ends. This theory he developed in an article (or 'Tract') entitled *The Psychology of the Octave*. His keenly sensitive nature made him realise that 'Christians who do not share the same doctrinal beliefs and loyalty to the Pope cannot be invited to share in the wording of the Wattson/Jones Octave, admirable and sincere though their intentions were'. He was convinced that Prayer which does not give offence to anyone, or engender compromise, must be UNIVERSAL PRAYER - inspired by resignation, even abandonment, of our own will to the will of Christ, who prayed 'that ALL may be one', accepting humbly that it is God who will give Visible Unity through whatever means He wills. 'We must pray,' he insisted, 'not that "the others" may be converted to us, but that we may ALL be drawn closer to Christ'.

In his all-embracing fervour, Abbé Couturier wished that the whole of that special section of the prayer of Our Lord during the Last Supper should be meditated upon and recited in full, in order to appreciate and to emphasise the universality of its inclusiveness: '*That they may all be one; even as you, Father, are in me and I in you; that they also may be in us, so that the world may believe*':

'The universal prayer of Christ must penetrate and reverberate in every Christian soul, giving full expression to the prayer of the whole Christ - the Risen Christ - EMULATING the prayer of Christ - all converging on God - in Christ. For at least one period during the year there must be great and visible intercession on the part of all the People of God, a living vibrant prayer, simultaneously rising up to God -

because all bear responsibility for the fragmentation of Christendom. It is the Holy Spirit praying in us, rather than we praying on our own.'

It was his firm conviction that prayer leads to charity; charity leads to faith and truth, which in turn lead to unity - not the other way round. Here we see the seedbed of what he called 'Spiritual Emulation' and the 'Invisible Monastery'.

Many months were devoted to developing a pattern of witness and worship for the January Octave of Prayer which would be credible not only for Lyon but for other parts of France. It was celebrated in Lyon for the first time as a *Triduum for the return to Unity* on January 20th-22th, 1933 - exactly twenty five years from the first celebration at Graymoor, New York and Moreton-in-Marsh in England. As everyone did not share the Abbé's enthusiasm he felt that discretion was the better part of valour and decided on a triduum rather than a whole week. It was celebrated in the Church of Saint Francis de Sales. Liturgical vocal music was sung by Catholic and Slav Choirs, alternately, thus linking East and West - Roman Catholics and Orthodox. The following year, the Octave was observed for a full week, January 18th-25th 1934, 'with solemnity', now including a great homily and service of prayer in the Cathedral itself, as it has been celebrated ever since. In 1935, the observance included liturgies in some of Lyon's Orthodox churches and the word Octave was used for the last time: Christians of other communions and nations were adding their prayers and Abbé Couturier rejoiced that 'the great Orchestra of the Spirit resounded in prayer for reconciliation and unity in Christ'.

As a consequence in 1936, he greatly rejoiced to see the old Octave renamed 'The Week of Universal Prayer of Christians for the Unity of Christians'. A sermon was preached on the subject of Israel and Christianity, because for Abbé Couturier there were no limits to the dominion of the Cosmic Christ, who prays that all may be one; therefore Jews (and indeed all humanity) were included in the scope of the Week. All the preparatory literature and prayers were compiled by the Abbé himself. Since he realised that the time for the theologians and members of the hierarchies to lead the work towards Christian Unity had not yet come, he placed great importance upon the need for purification and detachment by prayer, rooted in the prayer of Christ himself in John 17. 'Here,' he pointed out,

‘doctrinal confusion is avoided, because prayer rises above without obscuring the barriers - making prayer rest in the heart of Christ - whether in their various places of worship, in the full independence of their beliefs, their rites, their spiritual traditions - families of Christians, separated from one another, will send up together from the heart a single appeal’.

Describing his own prayer he wrote,

‘My prayer for Unity comes from my heart - it filters through the circulation of the Mystical Body, as does my brother's prayer, though he be far removed from me by the content of his beliefs. There will be no need to say – “I pray for so-and-so”; what will matter most is to say – “I let the other pray in me” (spiritual emulation) – “I open to him the path of my soul - may the way of my prayer be freely open to him - so at the altar, in the Holy Mass, at the Choir Office, in silent prayer, with me and in me, are praying my brethren, Protestant, Anglican, Orthodox” - and just as truly, I am, and I pass into the loyal and sincere prayer of the Divine Liturgy and the Offices of convinced Orthodox believers, into the public and private prayer of fervent Anglicans, into the fervent Protestant commemorations of the Holy Supper.’

An all-embracing circle, surely, of universal prayer. Through Christocentric prayer Abbé Couturier claimed that

‘in spite of differences and persecutions we have come to a period of mutual esteem - of brotherhood - founded on that which really unites us - in a word, we have come to a time of spiritual emulation - in other words, to a right relation between the virtues of truth and charity.’

By extension this led to his great vision of the ‘Invisible Monastery’ - a fellowship of Christians, invisible in its totality, who pray for Unity – ‘the action is spiritual emulation developed in every direction.’

Through his ministry for Christian Unity Abbé Couturier acquired a wide circle of friends in many denominations - not only in France but throughout Europe - which included the Swiss Pastor Roger Schutz and Pastor Max Thurian, founders of the Reformed (Calvinist)

Community at Taizé (now ecumenical); the Sisters of the Reformed (again, Calvinist) Community at Grandchamp, Switzerland; the World Council of Churches; Lutherans in Sweden, through Pastor Rosendal; and of course many in England, especially in the Anglican religious orders. There were even ecumenical radio broadcasts made in Lyon and Paris. At the Cistercian Abbey of Notre Dame des Dombes he was a frequent visitor and here he organised and took part in interconfessional discussions set in the peace-filled contemplative setting of the monastery. The famous *Groupe des Dombes* still exists and to this day continues Couturier's vision and spirit.

Two visits were made to England - one in 1937 and one in 1938. After prayerful reflection and consultation he decided to visit pro-Roman Catholic Anglican establishments - sometimes called Anglican Papalist - with whom he had frequently corresponded and some of whom had been to visit him in Lyon. Arrangements were made with Cardinal Hinsley of Westminster and Abbé Couturier arrived in London September 7th 1937. Both visits were regarded as private and personal, so there was no official reception. Visits were made to the Anglican Benedictine Abbey at Nashdom (now at Elmore, Berkshire); to the Cowley Fathers at Oxford (the Society of Saint John the Evangelist, the first Anglican religious community for men founded since the Dissolution of the Monasteries); to the Society of the Sacred Mission at Kelham; and to over a dozen religious communities of women. (A special note is warranted here about one of the members of the Kelham Community, Father George Every, the theologian and poet. In his own inimitable, poetic style he stated, '..... in 1973 I was led to make my submission to Rome'. Since then he has lived at Oscott College, sharing generously theological scholarship and spiritual blessings - so we are privileged to have living in Birmingham a living link with Abbé Couturier.) Everywhere the Abbé went he rejoiced in the spiritual atmosphere that transcends division. He understood English but always communicated through an interpreter and, if he felt that he had not been clearly understood, he repeated the sentence in French. Everything he said was to promote progress on the spiritual path which leaves the love of separation behind and, through parallel emulation, friendship, and union in prayer, leads closer to Christ until he brings all to convergence in himself. Again in 1938 he spent six weeks in England at the request of his Anglican friends, revisiting Anglican monasteries and convents. The Fathers at Mirfield wrote, 'This visit has been for us a divine benediction', which expressed the sentiments of all who came into contact with him.

He was invited to pay another visit in 1939, but the outbreak of war made negotiations difficult. In any case, the Roman Catholic authorities in England were cautious and feared that the Abbé Couturier had been over-generous in his associations with Anglicans. Thus the desired permission was denied. On his part, as he was absolutely loyal to the Catholic Church, its hierarchy and teaching - a loyalty and integrity which was recognised and respected by members of other denominations and summed up in the words of the Orthodox Professor Zander: 'He was a living paradox, Catholic to the depth of his soul, priest in the very essence of his nature; he was friend of Protestants, of Orthodox, of Anglicans'. In order to avoid any misunderstanding he bowed to authority, so the visit never took place. Even so, the way in which Catholic-minded Anglicans felt their integrity and practice of Catholic life and faith, along with that of the Church of England in general, were taken seriously by a celebrated priest from France, prepared important foundations for hopes of rapprochement after the war and especially the new situation arising from Vatican II with Roman Catholics in Britain itself.

During World War II, largely on account of his extensive international contacts, Couturier was imprisoned by the Gestapo. This broke his health, but he came to identify his suffering and heart disease as a cross he was now called to take up in the service of the Unity of Christians. He continued to write letters; to pray the liturgy of the Church with that great deliberation and attentiveness he had learned of Beauduin's Monks of Unity at Amay, inserting many names after the Pope's and his archbishop's in the canon of the mass, and stuffing papers with countless intentions into the burse for his daily celebration; to make the arrangements for the Week of Prayer; and to sustain his many contacts and friendships around the world which could lead to Unity. He lived to rejoice in the World Council of Churches in the aftermath of a broken and chastened Christendom after the war. And though his own Church did not join the new body, his hope that Rome could lead an 'appeal for convergence' was received by Pope Pius XII at the hand of the Abbé's delighted archbishop, Cardinal Gerlier. It may have taken years for the full effect of this to make itself felt, but in 1959 Pope John XXIII endorsed the Week of Prayer that had been transformed by Paul Couturier, instinctively embraced throughout the Catholic Church, and long adopted by the Faith and Order Movement and the World Council of Churches into which it evolved. Indeed, many of the words and thinking in the Decree on Ecumenism from Vatican II itself, *Unitatis redintegratio*, published under Pope Paul VI on 21st November 1964, could have been written by the Abbé himself.

With so a fragile physique, a diabetic and never enjoying robust health, by 1952 he had become very frail and was confined to his sister's flat in Lyon. But the Week of Prayer for Christian Unity in that year, as planned by him was celebrated with 'Pomp and Circumstance'. The poet and dramatist Paul Claudel was invited to give a paper on *Why I Love the Bible*. Unable to attend in person, Abbé Couturier prayed from his bed with uplifted hands. The congregation was ecstatic and Cardinal Gerlier of Lyon went in person to congratulate and to thank the Abbé for the success of the evening.

In the spring of the same year Maximus IV, Patriarch of the Greek Catholic Church of the Melchites, Patriarch of Antioch and all the East, nominated Abbé Paul Couturier an honorary Archimandrite (equivalent in dignity to a Western Monsignor) of Alexandria and authorized him to wear the insignia of that rank - a voluminous black cloak and an ornate crucifix on a chain. This honour was conferred in recognition of his generosity in making himself 'all things to all men' for the love of Christ and the cause of Christian Unity. Paul Couturier continued to write and to re-write his 'Spiritual Testament' entitled *Prayer and Christian Unity*, which runs to nearly 10,000 words. Eventually he signed a copy and it carries the *Imprimatur* of the Archbishop of Lyon.

His last celebration of mass was on March 21st 1953, the old feast of Saint Benedict, when the whole of Christendom was gathered up together in his prayer to his Heavenly Father. Shortly after midnight, early on March 24 1953 he went to his heavenly home. At his Requiem Mass the Cardinal Archbishop of Lyon paid tribute to a life devoted to prayer and to the cause of Christian Unity, hailing him as its Apostle. The final tribute at the graveside was paid by Alexandre de Weymarn, Director of the Press Bureau of the World Council of Churches. For him

'the ecumenical programme of Abbé Couturier found its completest expression in *spiritual emulation* That the ecumenical cause has found in the Roman Catholic Church so venerable a champion is a benediction as much for herself as for the separated Churches.'

This was a glorious final ecumenical tribute. But of course it was not the end - though it could be said to mark the end of the beginning. 'The best was yet to be', as the spirituality,

the insights and the sincerity of Paul Couturier had a bearing on the deliberations on ecumenism during the Second Vatican Council. In sections 7 and 8 of the Decree on Ecumenism, it reads:

‘The faithful should remember that they promote union among Christians better, that indeed they live it better, when they try to live holier lives according to the Gospel. For the closer their union with the Father, the Word, and the Spirit, the more deeply and easily will they be able to grow in mutual brotherly love. This change of heart and holiness of life, along with public and private prayer for the unity of Christians, should be regarded as the soul of the whole ecumenical movement, and merits the name, “spiritual ecumenism.” ’

He may not have been expressly named, but it would surely please him that the term he invented and everything it and he stand for were thus enshrined in the Church at her very heart for all time.

Paul Irénée's practice of Spiritual Emulation and his vision of the Invisible Monastery of people in prayer, his vision and re-vision of the Week of Prayer for Christian Unity still continue to light the path of our spiritual pilgrimage. ‘Christian Unity’, he wrote, ‘will be attained when the Praying Christ has found enough Christian souls in all confessions, in whom He Himself can freely pray to His Father for Unity.....’

Sister Teresa Burke is one of the Sisters of Charity of St Paul the Apostle, based at Selly Park, Birmingham. She is secretary of the Christian Unity Commission of the Archdiocese of Birmingham. The paper, originally delivered to the Worcester branch of the Newman Association in the Week of Prayer 2003, was presented at the Couturier colloquium at Brugge in June 2003.

Sources consulted and quoted

1. *Paul Couturier and Unity in Christ*, Geoffrey Curtis, London, SCM 1964
2. *Abbé Paul Couturier*, Maurice Villain SM, (first published in French, Tournai, Casterman 1957) translated by the Sisters of the Holy Cross, Haywards Heath, 1959
3. Decree on Ecumenism, *Unitatis Redintegratio*, Vatican II, 1964
4. One in Christ 1966, no.3: *The Ecumenical Testament of Abbé Paul Couturier*
5. One in Christ 1987, no.3: *The Group of Les Dombes*, Alain Blancy
6. One in Christ 1991, no.4: *The Ecumenical Methodology of the Abbé Paul Couturier*, Peter Hocken

7. The Library of the Community of the Holy Cross, Rempstone, Loughborough