

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

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**The Invisible Monastery : Ecumenical Friendship and Prayer for
Unity**

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The great eighteenth century American evangelist, Jonathan Edwards, called for a unity of the Spirit so that the whole world might hear of Christ. All engaged in this work of evangelisation were in some sense joined through the Spirit. His call in England was repeated early the next century by James Haldane Stewart, rector of St Bride's, Liverpool, and eventually found its way into the World Evangelical Alliance, from whose writings we probably received the popularisation of the word 'ecumenical'. Stewart asked for the first Monday of each year to be given over to ecumenical prayer and the Alliance had developed this into a week.

But others also looked for weeks of prayer for unity, and especially among Roman Catholics and Anglicans, with the rejoining of those two Communion a particular concern. The Oxford Movement, and Newman in particular, worked along these lines; and in 1857 indeed there was founded in this country the 'Association for the Promotion of the Unity of Christendom' for Roman Catholics, Orthodox and Anglicans. Some members of the Roman Catholic hierarchy were against it, however, and after a few years members of that confession were forbidden to be members, although it continued until 1921, composed virtually entirely Anglicans.

Meanwhile, other avenues were explored. These were often through growing friendships between people who were awake to the challenge of disunity. This really should not surprise us. Historians often argue that 'movements' cannot happen without people;

sociologists that people have to interact; theologians that these are within the total reaction of lives to the Holy Spirit. That takes us back to Edwards; on to Teilhard de Chardin and through to the physical scientists of today. One such friendship was between Lewis Wattson an Episcopalian Franciscan in the United States and Spencer Jones, incumbent of Moreton-in-Marsh, a relative of John Keble, leader of the Oxford Movement. Spencer Jones had preached in St. Matthew's, Westminster in 1900 in a series arranged by the Association. He was encouraged by Lord Halifax to publish the sermon. This became a book, *England and the Holy See*, which was noticed by Wattson. They corresponded and between them began in 1908 the week of eight days of prayer from the feast of the Chair of St. Peter at Rome on 18th January to the Conversion of St. Paul on the 25th. Although shortly afterwards Wattson and most of his community were received into the Roman Church, both he and Spencer remained friends and lived to see the seed grow. Their initial efforts were towards the eventual reunification of the Anglican Church to the Roman; but, as we know, it came to have a wider development.

Another friendship which spurred on efforts for unity was that between the British diplomat Viscount Halifax and the Abbé Fernand Portal. Their social positions made it possible for contacts to be made to Rome to consider the subject of Anglican Orders and although this subsequently produced the Bull *Apostolicae Curae* which declared such Orders absolutely null and void, the friends were not deterred, and indeed Rome itself confirmed a week of prayer for unity, though between Ascension Day and Pentecost. Of greater import was their continuing and increasingly well known work which led to the Malines Conversations.

In 1909 a young monk called Lambert Beauduin, teaching theology at a monastery in Louvain, attracted the attention of Cardinal Joseph Mercier, Archbishop of Malines in Belgium from 1906-1926, both through his interest in Liturgy and also in his longing for Christian Unity. Mercier was a great figure, heroic through the First World War and a legend in his lifetime. When he asked Halifax and Portal to Malines to take part in conversations about unity, he asked Beauduin to attend to give any special help and counsel. These conversations took place over a number of years, the last indeed finishing after the Cardinal's death, appropriately in the Week of Prayer, just as Halifax's was to be eight years later. They provided a platform for a greater understanding among the confessions and Beauduin went on a short time later to found the Monks of Unity at

Amay-sur-Meuse. Through all this history runs a thread of friendships and acquaintance. Lord Halifax as a boy had known some of the founding fathers of the Association. Cardinal Léon-Josef Suenens, who died in May 1996, had known and was encouraged in his ecumenical life by both Mercier and Beauduin.

And the Monks of Unity were to be visited by a figure whose horizons were far larger than they had originally envisaged. Paul Couturier was by all accounts a very ordinary French priest, correct and poor, with clerical mannerisms which might irritate and a language and daily round which showed all the influences of his place and time - a good priest but a poor teacher, seemingly finding it difficult to keep order, (though this did not trouble him unduly). But for his gift for friendship, this priest at Lyons might have ended his days in obscurity, a retired schoolmaster and sharing a flat with his unmarried sister, Marie. Marie suffered from a neurotic illness and so nearly every night, after an already full day of teaching, writing and priestly duties, Couturier used to walk down from the *Collège des Chartreux* to have supper with her, except for the four weeks every year in which he was away, and during which he kept up a voluminous correspondence with her. In his last years, it was there he retired and remained. So his whole life might have been.

Three things spurred him into an unlooked-for world. The first was his visit to the monastery at Amay, whence he brought back the idea of the Week of Prayer and translated it in his own way at Lyon. The second was his and his sister's work with Lyon's Russian refugees from whom he learned his great affinity with the Christians of the East. The third was his friendship with the businessman, Victor Carlhian, with whom he spent his month away from Lyon at the family estate, first as tutor to his child and then as chaplain and friend. It was M. Carlhian who introduced him to the Jesuit Albert Valensin, who in turn led him to contacts with the Orthodox emigrés, but also to a wider concept of Christian charity - and therefore an expansion of the idea of Christian unity away from its narrow bands as the mere joining of two or three distinct Confessions. Throughout Couturier's ecumenical work, Carlhian and his wife were generous hosts and round their table, undoubtedly, many friendships and many positive futures were formed. I suspect that Victor Carlhian is one of the unsung saints of the ecumenical field; he was certainly a linch pin. Drawing so many strands together, he epitomised Christian charity.

Couturier knew that he was building on the work of Wattson and Jones and the Week that they had founded, but now he had a wider perspective. He was a man of his day and would still view the ecumenical movement in terms of eventual reunion with the see of Rome, but not only on Rome's terms or at any price. The unity of the Church to be revealed would entail that all the present confessions would have to be renewed and reformed, Rome included; a unity which no one body could see for the moment - it would be attained 'in the way that God wills, by whatever means he wills'. As his reborn Week grew from the first speech, delivered by his friend Valensin, Couturier's understanding of other people's beliefs, worship, spiritual life, perspectives, cultures and nations, including the insights of those concerned with Jews, Islam and other religions, embraced all in network of prayer and friendship.

Meanwhile, he began improving his understanding of Anglicanism, meeting Spencer Jones and counting Dom Gregory Dix (the noted liturgist), Dom Benedict Ley (novice master at Nashdom and committed European), and Dom Martin Collett (Nashdom's abbot) among his friends. Indeed, he understood Anglicanism as well as anyone on the Continent at the time. He corresponded with two Anglican lay people, Arthur Smallwood (a mentor of William of Glasshampton, the community of contemplative Franciscans) and Maisie Spens, who after Couturier's death brought his name and work to a still wider public. Maisie Spens was the link with the Farncombe Community (an ecumenical order of women dedicated to prayer and work for Christian Unity, founded by Carol Graham who had also founded the Order of Sisters in the ecumenical Church of South India in 1952) and the Fellowship of Prayer (a forerunner to the foundation of Churches Together in Britain and Ireland's Living Spirituality Network in 2000). The Abbé's outreach was thus broad. One direct effect of his spiritual network was on these two bodies: the community of Reformed sisters at Grandchamp had a third order called 'Watchers', from which undoubtedly some of the inspiration for the Fellowship of Prayer, and particularly the Companions of the Farncombe Community, came. A second was the great spiritual response to him by those welcoming the commitment to the Week of Prayer in many countries throughout the world. He rejoiced, therefore, to see the setting up of the World Council of Churches and corresponded with Dr Visser't Hooft, one of its great architects. Through the strong links of this intercession and friendly support, which also included Alexandre Weymarn, its information officer, and Oliver Tomkins, the very ecumenical

future Bishop of Bristol, he ensured that the WCC espoused the Week of Prayer, as it does to this day.

This total devotion to prayer and commitment to strengthening bonds of love and friendship with different Christians would take its toll. Couturier understood suffering. He sometimes went too far for the authorities of his own Church to give him total support, for although his scientific mind would want everything correctly understood, he would not let dogma stand in the way of exploration or charity. It was this sense of charity which had been opened up through his friendship with Carlhian, this willingness to open his arms to those who were travelling a different road to himself, that made him understand and act upon Jesus' High Priestly Prayer, offered the night before the Lord's sacrifice on the Cross. He suffered also on account of his imprisonment during the Second World War. Though, characteristically, he praised God for the time it gave him for prayer and meditation, his already frail health was never the same again. Thus costly prayer was the backbone of his work and the ground of his theology - a lived rather than an academic science. Indeed, in his latter years he had to be restrained from expending too much time in his private devotions, for they were wearing him out.

Maisie Spens said that the Abbé symbolised unity in his own person, his contacts were so numerous, his last oratory set up in his sister's house full of religious symbols and icons collected from all kinds of friends, letters and cards from people he treasured filling his burse on the altar at his daily mass. He believed that in the liturgy they were all drawn together in the life of the Spirit (thus, though from a very different angle and entirely different outlook on the Faith, we are back to Jonathan Edwards), as part of a great Invisible Monastery. He believed that this monastery, a monastery without walls or particular place, was a great company of souls, perhaps quite unknown to one another, who were conscious through the work of the Spirit of the great scandal of disunity among Christians and the Churches; and who sought by prayer, action and education to put this right. In 1944 he suggested that, every Thursday evening, prayer should be said all over the world, as in a vast invisible monastery, for unity, absorbed into the life of Christ as he prays his great Johannine prayer, 'that they all may be one'.

He called - particularly towards the end of his life, when he had seen much suffering, from the Russian emigrés to those who faced the great evils of the Second World War -

for all to seek pardon from one another for our guilt over our divisions and our misunderstandings of one another, and especially where one branch of Christianity had persecuted another. He also encouraged Christians to go on pilgrimage together, as that too was a sign of the Christian's journey in company, one with the other, as well as a reflection of the union with Christ and each other of the whole Community of saints.

His work lives on, in very different society. The continued divisions of the nations would have saddened him; but the growing union among the churches would have delighted him and on which surely even now he would have been pressing us on to further commitment towards each other in charity and understanding. The Invisible Monastery is alive, in that vast numbers do work (not least when they sometimes feel quite isolated) and pray for the unity of God's people. Let us hope that from people like the Abbé Paul Couturier, heir to a long history of the search for unity, and friends to many others, will be an inspiration to let that Monastery grow until it fills the whole world.

The Revd Paul Renyard is a former Chaplain of the Living Spirituality Network, part of the work of Churches Together in Britain and Ireland. Although he was prevented from being present, this paper was delivered on his behalf at the Westminster conference in March 2003.