

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

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

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**Paul Couturier, Blessed Mariella Gabriella of Unity and the
Monks of Nashdom**

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I joined my community at Nashdom Abbey on January 7th 1964 and Dom Benedict Ley, priest and monk, died on the 4th February that same year. So, for a few weeks, I shared monastic life with this great man whose most notable achievement was his work for the Unity of the church. This was the fruit of his friendship with the Abbé Paul Couturier. Dom Benedict joined the Anglican community at Nashdom Abbey in Buckinghamshire in 1926, the year it moved there from Pershore Abbey in Worcestershire. Paul Couturier first visited Nashdom Abbey in 1937. He was also there on the 16th July 1938, when he attended the profession of Brother Andrew Beard and afterwards gave him a blessing.

The timing is significant because Couturier's visit to the priory at Amay-sur-Meuse in 1932 aroused his interest in new dimensions and opportunities of the ecumenical movement. It introducing him to the work of Cardinal Mercier of Malines and Lord Halifax, a significant figure among Anglo-Catholics. Lord Halifax had met, by chance, in 1890, a French Vincentian priest and ecumenist, Abbé Étienne Fernand Portal. This resulted in Conversations to further the cause of unity between the Church of England and the Roman Catholic Church. Their work together was to prove abortive when *Apostolicae Curae* was published in 1896. Both men were profoundly disappointed but it led Halifax, in the 1920s, to reopen the matter with Cardinal Mercier; and that led to the Malines Conversations which were, again, abortive at the time, following the Cardinal's death in 1926. Abbé Portal also died that year. But this ecumenical initiative led in time to a broader embrace of unity, not just between Rome and Canterbury but Orthodox and

Protestant Churches as well. A fellow participant with Mercier and Portal at Malines had been Dom Lambert Beauduin. Paul Couturier, visiting the Monks of Unity he founded at Amay, thus became an inheritor of an ecumenical spiritual movement which had already embraced the Nashdom community in the preceding decades.

In 1964, I had not heard of the Cistercian nun, Sister Maria Gabriella, or her community at Grottaferrata in the Alban Hills, near Rome, or Vitorchiano (Viterbo), where her community later transferred. The community at Nashdom Abbey did pray regularly for the Unity of the whole Church, especially on Thursdays, when the Unity Candle was lit. Being Anglo-Catholic, or more accurately, Anglo-Papalist, the main intention was for unity with the Holy See, or, as was sometimes said, 'Reunion with Rome'. It was not until after the 1960s, following the Second Vatican Council, that the focus widened to include not only the churches of the East but Protestant Churches too. And so gradually I learned more of what lay behind this prayer, and the significance of Blessed Maria Gabriella's association with the Anglican Benedictine community of which I was now a part.

Mother Pia, the Abbess of Grottaferrata, had studied in France and became a close friend and correspondent of the Abbé Paul Couturier; she shared his vision for the future built on a 'vertical ecumenism' of prayer. She was an extraordinary and remarkable woman who inspired others, not least from among her own sisters, with her courage and sanctity. She also encouraged them to offer their lives in the cause of Unity. Sister Maria Gabriella was not the first of her sisters to do so, nor the first to have her self-oblation accepted. The increasingly well established Octave or Week of Prayer culminated with the feast of the Conversion of St Paul on the 25th January. As His Holiness Pope John Paul II said in his sermon on that day in 1983, the Apostle of the Gentiles gives the basis upon which Unity must be sought and built: conversion, the cross (self-offering for others) and prayer are the only way. It was this that inspired Blessed Maria Gabriella during the Unity Octave of 1938. On the feast of St George, April 23rd 1939, her life's oblation was completed.

Mother Pia did not ask her sisters to die for the cause of the Unity of Christ's Body, the Church. Rather, she encouraged them to live and pray that the will of God be done in and through Christ using the High Priestly prayer of St John's Gospel, chapter seventeen. Sister Maria Gabriella is but a shining example of that quality of love that is more concerned with giving than with getting; and the terrible suffering caused by the tuberculosis which afflicted

her served only to enhance her devotion and love. In some ways she reflects St Thérèse of Lisieux, in her simplicity and joy. 'I can never thank God enough,' she wrote.

Jesus said, 'Greater love has no one than this, than to lay down one's life for a friend: You are my friends if you do what I command you: Be charitable to one another.' That was what Paul Couturier conveyed when he went on his pilgrimage of religious communities of all confessions, enlisting monks and nuns in this Apostolate of Prayer for Unity. Many others have joined the Apostolate by lives lived for the cause. In my own community I can certainly name three who heard the call and responded. Dom Andrew Beard, who was professed in 1938, was one. Dom Benedict Ley was a second. He corresponded with Abbess Pia directly, and, through her, with Sister Maria Gabriella. The latter sent affectionate messages of encouragement to Dom Benedict. When she was close to death, she touchingly sent him a picture of the Sacred Heart that she had signed. Dom Godfrey Stokes, who joined the community a little later, also responded and became a lifelong devotee of the cause. To these three I must add the name of Dom Augustine Morris, who was Abbot from 1948 to 1974. He too did much to foster and further ecumenism. And there were, and are, others besides. My community continues to work and pray '*Ut omnes unum sint*' – 'That they may all be one.'

2003 is not only the fiftieth anniversary of the death of Paul Couturier, it is the twentieth anniversary of the Beatification of Blessed Maria Gabriella of Unity, significantly, on the feast of the Conversion of St Paul, the concluding day of the Week of Prayer for Christian Unity. She is too little known generally and, outside the circle of Cistercians, as far as I can gather, has yet to be liturgically celebrated. As Anglicans, we have elevated her by keeping the 22nd April as her feast day. Though it should have been the 23rd April, the 22nd is kept so as not to conflict with St George, Patron Saint of England - a kind ecumenical gesture! Speaking both as a Anglican and as an Englishman, I am rather pleased that Almighty God chose to call her to himself on that day.

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