

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

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A prisoner for the Lord, at home in the House of Bethany

Sister Marian SSB, Sister Rita-Elizabeth SSB and Paul Couturier

It would be a mistake to think that Paul Couturier's idea for the Invisible Monastery, or his remarkable aptitude for spiritual friendship, arose solely from Benedictine traditions of community and hospitality. The Anglican Society of the Sisters of Bethany, founded in Lloyd Square, Clerkenwell, London in 1866, bears a family likeness to the Roman Catholic Daughters of Charity of St Vincent de Paul, whose other name - Lazarists - is evoked in the Anglicans' title. From within a 'hidden' contemplative milieu, the sisters' spirituality has been one of active service through the open 'Quietness and Confidence' of their houses, modelled on the home of Lazarus, Martha and Mary, to which Jesus came in Bethany. The Reverend Mother Foundress, Etheldreda Anne Benett, had toured France in 1865 researching a Rule for her Anglican community and was especially inspired by the Visitation sisters and the teachings of St Francis de Sales. Owing to these friendly contacts with Catholics in France, she included daily prayer for Unity in the Rule from the outset. In the middle of the nineteenth century this was exceptional and she was surely thus a pioneer of spiritual ecumenism.

Lord Halifax brought the Abbé Portal to visit Bethany, and in 1938 the Abbé Couturier followed in his footsteps, drawn by Anglican religious who, like the Catholic sisters he knew, drew near to the Lord in by welcoming Him in the neighbour. At the March 2003 conference in Westminster, Sister Marian related the life and witness of Bethany, now based in Southsea, Hampshire, and read the account of the Abbé's visit to the sisters at Clerkenwell. Additional notes by Sister Rita-Elizabeth SSB are also included.

Recently we were asked to provide any correspondence arising from contact with the Abbé Paul Couturier. It was interesting to read the account of that visit, on July 27, 1938 in the Community Chronicles.

‘He came at 5.20 with Fr Fynes Clinton - who acted as his interpreter as he does not speak English - and was received by the Rev. Mother and Fr Bartlett. The Sisters were assembled in Bethany as the organ was being cleaned and the chapel out of use. The Abbé first expressed his pleasure in coming and his joy in finding that one of the foundations of our Society is prayer for Unity.

He told us that he had during this visit to England had interviews with the Archbishops of Canterbury and York and the Bishop of Oxford. He then spoke of the Universal Prayer for Unity and the aim of corporate reunion, Fr Fynes Clinton translating as he went along.

The Abbé made a special appeal for prayers for the Pope, an old man and near death, and for his successor that he might be a man of courage and audacity, able to break through conventions and bring about Unity – ‘the day of miracles is not past’.

Fr Bartlett thanked the Abbé for his speech, Fr Fynes Clinton translating into French. We then knelt down and the Abbé offered a prayer for Unity and gave his blessing. He afterwards went into chapel, where he was sometime before the M. H. Sacrament - said the Angelus and examined the Chapel. He then went on to the Embroidery Rooms and saw some work - expressing pleasure and interest in it - and finally visited St. Barnabas’ Hospital.’

One of the sisters of the Society of St Margaret, at St Saviour's Priory in Haggerston, east London, wrote to the Sisters of Bethany (possibly to Sister Mary Blanch SSB, who was Revd Mother at the time) about the Abbé’s visit to their own convent:

‘First about the Abbé - he came to see us last Wednesday. It was an experience one will never forget. He came in the afternoon with Fr. Fynes Clinton and a young French professor who goes with him as interpreter as he cannot speak English, and of course the ubiquitous Mr. Bolshakoff!

He came up into the Common Room and sat down and talked to us. I am very stupid about following French but got the gist of it and picked up from our Sisters afterwards. He said he had come with the approval of his Archbishop at the request of his Anglican friends to make *'une pèlerinage anglicane'*. He spoke of the pain of separation and his whole beautiful face reflected that pain. He said *'C'est une tristesse, une tristesse insupportable'*. All heresies were terrible, but this is the most terrible, for it is *'une hérésie contre l'amour'*, and of that we are all guilty. He said it was unlikely that we should see reunion, but it was for us to prepare for it by prayer and by growing in love. He is most beautiful, all soul. A little man with a wasted face and large dark eyes and such a smile. Sister Dora said he made us all look so earthly!

Then he took us into chapel, and knelt there and said the Mystery of the Coming of the Holy Spirit, and asking us to respond in English to his Latin. It was for reunion and for this Convent. It seems incredible that there knelt a Roman Catholic Priest before the Tabernacle leading our prayer.

Then he went to the Eikon which was sent from Harlin and Mr. Bolshakoff (at his request), said a Russian Prayer to Our Lady, in which Fr. Fynes Clinton joined.'

Although the Abbé proposed the 18th to the 25th January for the 'Universal Prayer of Christians for Unity', he counted on the two broad periods of intercessions for Unity, Pentecost and January, continuing to exist side by side, to live and grow. The Pentecostal movement (Pope Leo XIII in 1895 instituted an annual novena of prayer from Ascension to Pentecost, even if in the wake of his adverse judgment on Anglican Orders) would be directed towards a more marked interiority, an atmosphere of the silent unobtrusive Upper Room Retreat, in commemorative union with the Apostles awaiting the outpouring of the Spirit. January would be reserved for a time more open to public witness.

One can imagine the joy with which the sisters received the Abbé's words, echoing as they did so profoundly the precepts of Mother Foundress for her Community to pray for the unity of Christians in a hidden life of prayer. It was an eloquent affirmation of the work and prayer of the Community since its foundation in 1866.

We, in our day, try to be faithful to her vision. As a Community we pray daily for the unity of Christians during the Midday Office litany. The intention of the Eucharist every Thursday is for Unity and is followed by our Office for Unity. On Fridays we keep a three hour Prayer Watch before the Blessed Sacrament and, in addition, each sister has her own special Unity intentions. Each sister makes the offering of herself in the hidden life of prayer within the community, in the belief that God desires and accepts that offering. We are encouraged to persevere by some words of the Abbé with which he concluded one of his letters to the Community:

‘In Christ let us pray, pray, pray for Unity’.

Sister Marian then went on to read a letter received by the community in early 1945. Amazingly he apologizes for not writing a long letter, but he movingly describes his arrest and imprisonment by the Germans and his extraordinary labours in preparation of the recent Week of Prayer - all letters written by hand, all the great number of tracts to be sent around the globe packed, weighed and personally deposited at the Post Office in the midst of his exiguous school and priestly duties. The letter shows him at one with his Anglican friends, especially the Sisters of Bethany, with whose ecumenical and prayerful spirit he feels a clear affinity. As it also gives a first hand insight into the passion, personality and spirituality of Couturier himself, it is given here in full.

Pax. March 7th, 1945.

What can you be thinking of me? Not to have answered such deeply moving and comforting letters as you have written to me or have written about me to Soeur Marguerite at Grandchamp! I know well that your letters have taken a long time to come from England, a good month (except your card) - I know well also that they came when I was in the furnace of preparation for the Week of Unity (from November to the end of February - the preparation, the week and its consequences) - I well know that the winter was hard, much frost, very little fuel, very defective feeding and want of nourishment - I know that my health has been failing - but all this could not excuse me altogether. I think I need pardon from you, and for this I ask you with all my heart: with a great and humble plea for your forgiveness. Yet I can assure you that I was praying for you all the more for not having written. I should like to write you a long letter. I have not replied to any of the numerous letters I have received from my dear England since last November. And I was

beginning by answering yours. I join this beginning of a letter started a long time ago and interrupted by the overwhelming burden of the Week of Unity, as a witness that forgetfulness does not overshadow my remembrance of you in the Lord.

What a treasure are my Anglican friendships! Only at the Altar in the morning and in my breviary prayer can I give thanks sufficiently and effectually. Oh yes! I have felt and do feel so much the strength of those prayers that you offered and do offer for me: you and all my friends in England. When shall I see you again? Archbishop Temple is dead, the Rev. Spencer Jones is dead. I have just been told that the Rev. Father Tribe (of Kelham) was killed by a bomb in the south of England. I pray for them with all my heart. They were very dear to me. I could have sent you two words on a card, but that was not enough for me. Today I am writing you a letter and sending also a card to say it is being sent off. I am even trying to send you some printed matter by letter-post, as letters of 500g are authorised for England.

All the news you sent me gave me great joy in the Lord. I do not deserve to be loved by so many saintly and faithful friends, but I have always, more and more, great need of their prayers. I should like to express my immense gratitude directly to each one of them. I tell this to their Lord and my Lord. I cannot tell you how much I felt while I was in prison (from April 11th to June 12th, 1944) what you write to me: in Christ one finds oneself again. When we abandon ourselves to Him we feel that He who loves those whom we love infinitely more than we do, is doing and will do for them all that is needful. The prisoner in his powerlessness discovers luminously the power of Christ. The worst might have happened to me. Why was I arrested in the evening of the Tuesday in Easter Week at 6.30 when I was going into my sister's house? I do not yet know; they would not tell me. I think I am not far from the truth when I surmise that it was because of a denunciation vaguely inspired by our anti-Vichy feeling and by our love for England, for my sister was searched for and was able to escape. Until the liberation she had to keep hidden. In prison we were six, and sometimes even seven, in a space of four square metres. I must tell you that the prison, Montluc, one of the most modern in France, was under the care of the Wehrmacht and not of the Gestapo, who arrested, questioned and tortured for questioning when that seemed to them necessary. I was not tortured. They did not torture priests save on exceptional occasions.

The regime was humane: food; guard by the Wehrmacht soldiers; hygienic. For a long time I thought my sister was dead, for no news from the outer world could get in, and I knew that my sister (67 years old) was in very frail health. On the whole, this time was wonderful, thanks to detachment. I said my breviary, which they had left to me, taking much time over it. What joy! What joy! One day in the Gestapo cellars, while waiting to be questioned, I noted down on my breviary some inscriptions that prisoners had written on the walls. Two were in English: 'Don't be afraid for so little a thing as pain'; 'When all is lost France stays'; '*O Crux, spes unica. Ave.* (Holy Week 1944)'; 'Let us pray and suffer for the world. It will be born again more beautiful and more humane'.

What can I say to you about Unity? The growth is marvellous. At Lyon, this year again (but that is for the last time) it was very little. But Marseille, Toulouse, Angers, Roubain, Lille, had extraordinary gatherings. The Protestant share in it was very, very great. on the principles that you know of (*'parallélaboration'*, spiritual emulation.) I had to sent out between 85,000 and 87,000 tracts, posters and pamphlets In some places prayers were offered simultaneously in Churches and Protestant Chapels. The wonderful ecumenical poster which has the *imprimatur* of Mgr Beayssart, auxiliary archbishop of Paris, was put up in the churches and chapels of these same places. But I should require many pages to tell you all. The pictures of the Praying Christ? About 3,000 have been distributed since it was printed in 1940. It adorned Tract 41 and the first volume of Père Villain's *Conférences pour l'Unité Chrétienne*.

Quite recently I have been asked for a service. A young Jesuit Father (who is wonderfully ecumenical!) is bringing out (it is almost finished, in fact) a little volume on the vocation and the general outlook of a Missionary. At the beginning he wants to put long quotations from non-Catholic Christian Missionaries to show the beauty of the Christian Missionary in general, a thought and desire of spiritual emulation which is eminently praiseworthy. He asks me to get for him extracts of two or three pages written about an Anglican Missionary, one who is well known. I thought of Livingstone, but perhaps there are others. I thought too that I could confide to you this apostolic and ecumenical desire. The work is finished or nearly so, so time presses. Let us not lose this good chance of causing God to be adored in the spiritual gifts He has given to you, our Anglican brethren, in as much as your conviction is so loyal, sincere, deep and heroic. 'The earth is full of His Power.' 'God be praised!'

How many things I have to say! Writing is slow! Every day you are offered to the Lord when I offer Him all those whom I bear in remembrance and in my prayer and in my heart, poured out into His Own Divine Heart. Will you express my deep, deep gratitude, when you have a chance, to all those who have prayed for me and sustained me by their prayers while I was a prisoner. More than ever, while I was in prison, I experienced, I touched the Communion of Saints. That is no more a truth of faith, it is a truth of experience. And when I came out of prison, my first Mass (I had not been able to celebrate for two months) was celebrated in the Basilica of Notre Dame de Fourvière, (which overlooks Lyon) in thanksgiving for all the men and women who have kept me up by the strength and fervour of their prayers.....

And in a postcard of March 10th, he concludes:

I pray for you all more than ever, my dear friends. I live in the hope of seeing you again. May God bring me to you all! But He knows well what is best for us... In Christ let us pray, pray, pray for Unity.

Sister Marian is a member of the Society of the Sisters of Bethany, Southsea, Hampshire, of which Sister Rita Elizabeth is also Assistant Superior. These papers were delivered to the March 2003 Westminster conference.