

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

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**VI**

**Couturier and the Church Unity Octave: from the Anglican  
Papalists to the Present Day**

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Anglican papalists are convinced that the fulness of the Church is to be found both in the local Church, the bishop and his people, *and* in the universal Church, the communion of all the Churches with the Church of Rome, the Apostolic See. It is not a case of either/or, but of both/and. Thus full communion with Rome is not just some optional extra, which might be helpful, but is essential for the fulness of the Church.

Given this conviction, it is not surprising that unity with Rome is seen as a priority, indeed an urgent necessity. As long ago as 1818, Samuel Wix, Vicar of St Bartholomew-the-Less, published a small volume entitled,

*Reflections concerning the expediency of a Council of the Church of England and the Church of Rome being holden, with a view to accommodate religious differences and to promote the unity of religion in the bond of peace; humbly but earnestly recommended to the serious attention of His Royal Highness the Prince Regent, the Most Reverend The Archbishops, the Right Reverend the Bishops, the Reverend the Clergy, and all lay persons who are able and willing dispassionately to consider the important subject.*

Wix admitted, 'The unpopularity of the proposal is manifest.' (1)

Towards the end of the nineteenth century a different view of unity was put forward at the Grindelwald Conferences organised by the Methodist Henry Lunn. A chapter of his autobiography, *Chapters from my Life*, is entitled, 'Federation as a Step Towards Unity'. I

mention this, not just because he was my grandfather, but also because it is another reminder that work and prayer for unity has a long history; and further, it indicates a different view of unity to that of Anglican papalists.

The Church Unity Octave goes back to 1907 when Spencer Jones (who had published in 1902 *England and the Holy See - An Essay towards Reunion*) suggested to Paul Wattson the familiar period, running from the Feast of the Chair of St Peter to the Feast of the Conversion of St Paul, thus giving it a Rome orientation. I simply comment that, to take Edinburgh 1910 (that is, a date subsequent to the above) as the beginning of the modern ecumenical movement, says something about the so-called modern ecumenical movement.

In 1936 the Revd Henry Joy Fynes-Clinton, vicar of St Magnus the Martyr, an Anglo-Catholic bastion close by London Bridge, and Dom Gregory Dix went together to Lyon and met Couturier, and a strong friendship developed between them. In 1937 Couturier came to England with Fr Fynes as his host. Thus his first contacts were with people of a similar outlook to Fr Fynes. It is my reminiscence, in the early 1950s at St Magnus, that Dom Gregory Dix was perceived as being instrumental in enlarging Couturier's acquaintance with the Church of England, leading on to the broadening of the octave of prayer from its expression in the Church Unity Octave to its expression in the Week of Prayer for Christian Unity. The consequence was the gradual fading away of the Church Unity Octave. I remember it well - each year a decreasing number, very small, meeting under the guidance of Fr Fynes and Fr Ivan Young. The latter had the disconcerting habit, when chairing the meeting, of going off to sleep, which was all right until he woke up, always with a start.

The fading away of the Church Unity Octave and the coming to the fore of Couturier's new Week of Prayer seem to suggest a parting of the ways between Fr Fynes and Dom Gregory Dix. I do not think it is fair to put it in those terms, but there is a fundamental issue here, facing all who pray for unity. Putting it in the context of Anglican Papalist convictions, the issue is: How can we be as clear as possible in expressing and sharing our conviction that Christian Unity necessitates unity with Rome; without appearing to be narrow and exclusive - perhaps even sectarian - in our attitude?

For Couturier the prayer of Jesus in John 17 is central to his understanding of prayer for unity, so he produces for his Week of Prayer the formula that the visible unity of the Kingdom of God may be such as Christ wills and achieved by whatever means he wills (2). That is a formula which must encourage all Christians of good will to join in the Week of Prayer.

Praying for unity according to the will of Our Lord Jesus Christ raises the question: how clearly is that will expressed? God reveals his will to us on a 'need to know' basis. We can plead agnosticism regarding non-essentials, but not regarding essentials. Now we see through a glass, darkly; but not so darkly that we cannot see what we *now* 'need to know'. Those who believe that unity with Rome is a necessity, consequently believe that God has revealed this because, being a necessity, we need to know it.

But the issue remains: how do we express and share this conviction without appearing to be narrow and exclusive? And here we are much more favourably placed than the Abbé Couturier, Fr Fynes and Dom Gregory Dix, because we are post-Vatican II. The pre-Vatican II view of Christian unity in the Roman Catholic Church was largely exclusive. I refer, for example, to the ban on praying together, even the Lord's Prayer. Underlying this was a far-reaching mindset: doing things together with those of different convictions could be mistaken for weakness in our own convictions. Again, we might be 'contaminated' by wrong thinking and wrong practice. We today cannot afford to be smug looking back over this, because it is far from having gone away.

Yet the Second Vatican Council brought to the fore that the only acceptable approach to those of different convictions is the *inclusive* approach. Our present Pope John Paul II, in the Encyclical *Redemptor hominis* at the beginning of his papal ministry, expressed very clearly his commitment to the inclusive approach:

'True ecumenical activity means openness, drawing closer, availability for dialogue, and a shared investigation of the truth in the full evangelical and Christian sense; but in no way does it or can it mean giving up or in any way diminishing the treasures of divine truth that the Church has constantly confessed and taught.....

What we have just said must also be applied - although in another way and with due differences - to activity for coming closer together with the representatives of the non-Christian religions, an activity expressed through dialogue, contacts, prayer in common, investigation of the treasures of human spirituality, in which, as we know well, the members of these religions also are not lacking. Does it not sometimes happen that the firm belief of the followers of the non-Christian religions - a belief that is also an effect of the Spirit of truth operating outside the visible confines of the Mystical Body - can make Christians ashamed at being often themselves so disposed to doubt concerning the truths revealed by God and proclaimed by the Church and so prone to relax moral principles and open the way to ethical permissiveness. It is a noble thing to have a predisposition for understanding every person, analyzing every system and recognizing what is right; this does not at all mean losing certitude about one's own faith or weakening the principles of morality, the lack of which will soon make itself felt in the life of whole societies, with deplorable consequences besides.'<sup>(3)</sup>

The *inclusive* approach requires us to say to those of differing convictions: how do you see truth? We need to be ready and prepared to share with them how we see truth. And together we need to share our differing insights. The *exclusive* approach tends to suggest, 'We have the truth - you don't. Come and join us.' The pluralist approach seems merely to be saying: 'What is truth?'

The exclusive approach tends towards fundamentalism. It is not open to question. It achieves a sort of pseudo-objectivity by suspension of our critical faculties. In this it is not so dissimilar to the pluralist approach, which implies that each person's subjective view does not need to be assessed critically, lest it seem that we are inhibiting the freedom of each one to do that which is right in his own sight. The inclusive approach, on the other hand, demands the use of our critical faculties. 'It is a noble thing to have a predisposition for understanding every person, analyzing every system and recognizing what is right....'<sup>(4)</sup>

Apart from the requirement to use our critical faculties and the need to have a predisposition for understanding every person, which make the inclusive approach far

and away the most challenging, it is apparently the case that this approach is more open to misunderstanding. Some years ago planning permission for a mosque in Rome was sought. Some was asked if there was a *quid pro quo* in this - permission for a church in Mecca. An answer was given - that Christian 'tolerance' of non-Christian convictions meant that Christian convictions were not that strong, whereas Muslim convictions were so strong that in no way could they tolerate a church in Mecca.

Do not be misled by the example I have given into thinking that it is only other people who misunderstand the inclusive approach. This misunderstanding is widespread. Twice in the brief quotations from *Redemptor hominis* above, the Pope feels the need to face this problem: 'but in no way does it or can it mean giving up or in any way diminishing the treasures of divine truth that the Church has constantly confessed and taught'; and again, 'this does not at all mean losing certitude about one's own faith'.

Indeed I would suggest that the stronger one's own convictions, the more confident one will be in seeking to understand the differing convictions of others. It seems that some sort of similar point is being made in the recent reflection on the 'New Age' by the Pontifical Council for Culture and the Pontifical Council for Interreligious Dialogue, 'The present publication calls attention to the need to know and understand New Age as a cultural current, as well as the need for Catholics to have an understanding of authentic Catholic doctrine and spirituality in order [properly to assess] *New Age* themes.'<sup>(5)</sup>

I have been exploring how the inclusive approach promoted by Vatican II and the present Pope is the answer to the question: How can we be as clear as possible in expressing and sharing our conviction that Christian unity necessitates unity with Rome, without appearing to be narrow and exclusive - perhaps even sectarian - in our attitude? I think that it has been sometimes perceived in the past that Dom Gregory Dix and the Abbé Couturier, in the Week of Prayer, represent the inclusive approach. Certainly, there seems to be no doubt about the firmness of their conviction that Christian unity necessitates unity with Rome. Their efforts towards 'openness, drawing closer, availability for dialogue, and a shared investigation of the truth in the full evangelical and Christian sense' right across the Christian spectrum are well-documented.

Contrariwise, Fr Fynes and the Church Unity Octave may be thought to have demonstrated an exclusive approach. I wish to suggest some evidence that questions this perception. To start, I have two personal reminiscences of Fr Fynes on this matter. He had returned from a journey somewhere in East Anglia where he had found himself in a compartment of a non-corridor train, the only other occupant being a Baptist minister. He proceeded to recount to us his conversation with this minister, and it was obvious that he had learnt a lot about Baptist beliefs and practices. He had found the encounter full of interest, and it was clear that he had had a great respect for this chance acquaintance.

On another occasion. I had invited Fr Fynes to the Annual Dinner of the Ancient Society of College Youths, the London ringing society which used to ring the bells of St Magnus until the war. It was at Bridge House on London Bridge. He was late turning up, so I went outside to look for him. He was there, talking to his taxi driver. Ten minutes later he still had not come in to the VIP lounge, so I went out again, and they were still talking. This time, I was more insistent, so Fr Fynes said goodbye, and the taxi driver replied, 'Cheerio, Father, and thanks for the chat.' As we walked through, Fr Fynes said to me, 'What an interesting person. He is an orthodox Jew. Did you know that orthodox Jews ...' and, but for my cutting him short, Fr Fynes was about to tell me what he had learnt from that taxi driver.

Fr Fynes in practice, had an inclusive attitude to those of differing convictions. His loyalty to Rome was not uncritical, either. He wrote, for example, 'But it does mean the rectifying of the dislocation in the Apostolic College of the Catholic Episcopate. If it be that the prerogatives of Peter as President have overshadowed or do now lessen those of his brother-bishops, it is certainly true that the claim of the College to act without, or in defiance of their President, is unconstitutional.'<sup>(6)</sup> In this and in other ways Fr Fynes is certainly looking forward to the reforms of Vatican II.

I say above that Dom Gregory Dix's inclusive approach and commitment to reunion with Rome are well-documented. Suffice it now to refer briefly to the assessment of the Post-Tridentine Papal Communion in the 1947 Church of England doctrinal report, *Catholicity*. In its ante-penultimate paragraph it looks at what it perceives to be a largely exclusive attitude in the Roman Catholic Church at that time - the claim that the

Papal Communion, and it alone, constitutes in the eyes of God the entire Catholic Church of Christ; and the tendency to equate the Catholic Church with the kingdom of God.

However, it concludes:

‘Yet signs have multiplied in recent years, that whenever it can forget this sectarianism, and give a deliberate lead to all Christendom, outside as well as inside its own allegiance, on a matter of vital Christian interest, the Papacy can still command the attention and to a large extent secure the following of all Christians, and that it is the only Christian institution which can do so. It is at the head of a full half of Christendom, and that half, moreover, which shows no signs of diminished vitality and coherence. It is at once the strongest single bulwark of the historic tradition of Christian civilisation in Europe, and a pioneer of the modern Christian social teaching by which it is sought to remedy the desperate sickness from which that tradition now universally suffers. It is also the largest single missionary force in the world mission-field of today. Above all, it has never wavered in its adherence to the central Christian truths of the Trinity, the Incarnation, and the Redemption: for its mighty witness to these all orthodox Christians of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries have had cause to be deeply grateful.

Whatever the difficulties, amounting in some respects almost to an impossibility, of seeking corporately a direct theological approach to the Papal Communion at the present time, we believe that these indisputable facts have been too largely lost to sight in much recent Anglican thought about Christian unity.’<sup>(7)</sup>

That was written more than a decade before the Second Vatican Council. Today the Week of Prayer seems to be in a similar state of decline to that of the Church Unity Octave in the 1950s. A sense of urgency and priority in prayer and work for unity seems to have disappeared. Yet the basic need for unity has not gone; it just seems that we have lost sight of it.

I realise that, in such a brief look at the issue, I have not demonstrated my conclusion. Yet here it is. Notwithstanding their different backgrounds characters and temperaments, the Abbé Couturier, Dom Gregory Dix and Fr Fynes-Clinton shared the conviction of the need for unity with Rome, and also demonstrated an inclusive attitude in their approach to those of differing convictions.

As we commemorate the Abbé Couturier, it is my hope that we may be renewed in our efforts to pray and work - that the visible unity of the Kingdom of God may be such as Christ wills and achieved by whatever means he wills (that is, according to Couturier's formula). Also, it is my hope that we can be as clear as possible in expressing and sharing our conviction that Christ's will for the unity of the Church necessitates unity with Rome, without appearing to be narrow or exclusive in our attitude. And it is also my hope that we can pursue this prayer and work for unity with a renewed sense of urgency, and of confidence that the will of Our Lord Jesus Christ will be done.

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#### Notes

1. *The Quest for Catholicity*, Tavad, pp. 149-150
2. *Paul Couturier and Unity in Christ*, Curtis, Curtis, p. 289
3. *Redemptor hominis*, 6
4. *Ibid.*
5. *Jesus Christ the Bearer of the Water of Life*, p. 4
6. *Centenary Tractates*, 1933, No. 8
7. *Catholicity*, 1947, p. 40