

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

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**Paul Couturier and the Chemin Neuf Community: An Accidental
Legacy?**

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Born out of a charismatic prayer group in Lyon in 1973, the Chemin Neuf Community is one of a number of ‘new communities’ that sprung up in the heady years following the Second Vatican Council. A ‘Roman Catholic community with an ecumenical vocation’, the Community now has over a thousand members in twenty countries throughout the world, from Canada to Israel. Couples and celibates from many different Christian denominations, the members of the Chemin Neuf Community commit their lives to working for the renewal of the Church through mission, training and evangelism, drawing in particular on the Ignatian tradition, and with a special calling to pray and to work for the unity of Christians.

It is perhaps not surprising that a community founded in the early 1970s should have been strongly marked by the ecumenical movement. Laurent Fabre, one of the seven founder members of the Community, was a young Jesuit student when he received the ‘baptism of the Holy Spirit’ in 1971 at the hands of an American Episcopalian, and since the very beginning the Chemin Neuf Community has committed itself to various forms of adventurous ecumenical engagement. Catholics and non-Catholics are accepted as members on equal terms – indeed the Chemin Neuf is surely the only Roman Catholic religious community to have (at the time of writing) both a Mennonite and a Lutheran on its seven-strong governing council!

Nonetheless, and despite their common origins in the city of Lyon, it is fair to say that the extent of the debt that Chemin Neuf owes to the work of that great Lyonnais ecumenist, Paul Couturier, has taken time to become fully apparent.

The debt is in part a material one, due to a number of historical accidents which should perhaps be termed ‘charismatic coincidences’. The Community has for a number of years now been responsible for the Chapel of the Adoration at 10 rue Henri IV, where Couturier organised the first of his ‘Weeks for the Unity of Christians’ back in the 1930s. Members of the Community also teach at the *Collège des Chartreux* where Couturier spent most of his working life. More particularly, since 2001 Chemin Neuf has taken over the running of the Abbaye des Dombes, a former Trappist monastery where in 1938 Couturier founded the hugely influential ecumenical study group, the *Groupe des Dombes*. The Abbey archive still contains a large number of papers relating to the work of Couturier and his faithful disciple, Maurice Villain. Thus, somewhat to its own surprise, the Community has become the custodian of a substantial part of the Couturier legacy! A special edition of Chemin Neuf’s theology review, *Tychique*, published in March 2003 to mark the fiftieth anniversary of his death, has recently helped to draw attention to the importance of Couturier’s life and work.

More fundamental perhaps is the debt that Chemin Neuf’s own ecumenical spirituality owes to the thought and prayer of Couturier. Couturier’s direct influence is most obvious in the Prayer for Christian Unity composed by members of the Community from his writings and said daily at the Morning Office:

‘Lord Jesus, who prayed that we might all be one,
We pray to you for the unity of Christians
According to your will, according to your means.
May your Spirit enable us to experience the suffering caused by division,
To see our sin, and to hope beyond all hope.’

More subtly, in the ecumenical choices and orientations taken by the Community over the last thirty years, it is possible to discern a pattern of convergence with Couturier’s own approach, which might be more appropriately referred to as an ‘accidental legacy’ – or, perhaps, taken as a sign that the same Spirit which inspired him is still working to call Christian men and women to walk together on the difficult path towards reconciliation.

Prayer

Couturier's approach to ecumenism was centred above all on prayer, and on his awareness (heightened by his discovery in the early 1920s of the Ignatian Spiritual Exercises) that an 'oriented inner life' was an indispensable step on the road to reconciliation. Working at a time when institutional reconciliation was an impossible dream, and in the shadow of the Vatican's concerns about 'pan-Christian confusionism', Couturier came to see Christian unity as a problem that is absorbed by a mystery. For him the path towards unity began above all with personal conversion, made possible by a psychological de-coupling of the Church's indefectibility and the personal sinfulness of its individual members. His disciple Maurice Villain described this approach thus:

'unity is not a question of abjuration and return, but of purification, complementarity and recentering'.

Couturier also laid great stress on the role of the Holy Spirit in ecumenism, hence his emphasis on the importance of Pentecost Vigils for unity. In a text from 1945 on 'spiritual emulation' Couturier pointed to signs of renewal in all the churches, from the Oxford Movement in the Anglican Church to the first religious communities born out of the Reformed tradition (Taizé, of course), as examples of how the Spirit could work to bring separated brethren closer together. In this as in so many other things, Couturier seems to have foreseen the changes that swept the Church shortly after his death: the ecumenical pneumatology of Vatican II, and the prayerful enthusiasm of the Charismatic Renewal movement.

The Chemin Neuf's early influences conspired to place prayer at the heart of its own approach to ecumenism. The Community owes its origins to a multi-denominational charismatic prayer group, and the core commitment of all Community members (Catholic and non-Catholic) still remains the weekly prayer meeting. It is therefore not surprising that prayer for unity should remain central to the Chemin Neuf's calling, and we have seen how the Community was inspired directly by Couturier's own writings in formulating its own Prayer for Unity. From an early date Chemin Neuf has also been a child of the Ignatian tradition. The Community has found over time that the Spiritual Exercises, with their robust evangelical spirituality, are a

rich resource for ecumenical engagement. Their biblical focus makes them accessible to those from a non-Catholic background, while Ignatius' rules for the 'discernment of spirits' help to temper the energy and enthusiasm of the Charismatic tradition. The Ignatian discipline of 'review' is also a valuable asset, encouraging a discipline of careful listening and self-conscious reflection.

Chemin Neuf's commitment to prayer for unity has deepened and broadened particularly over the last ten years, as a result of the Community's growth in two apparently contradictory directions. On the one hand, the taking over of a number of monasteries (such as the Abbaye d'Hautecombe and the Abbaye des Dombes) has led the Community to develop a more stable, liturgical style of worship, in which a formal Office for the Unity of Christians takes place every Thursday evening. The Office begins with one Catholic and one non-Catholic processing to the altar bearing an empty paten and chalice, signs of the pain of separation and the hope of unity, while the assembly sings Psalm 121(122): 'I was glad when they said to me, "Let us go to the house of the Lord".'

On the other hand, the Community's widening *diaspora* has led to the foundation of an International Ecumenical Fraternity, a broad umbrella bringing together all those friends of Chemin Neuf who wish to meet together regularly to pray for unity. Members of the Fraternity (which is not to be confused with the independent organization, the International Ecumenical Fellowship) commit to a monthly meeting at which they watch a video on the theme of reconciliation (produced by the Community, and dubbed into fifteen languages), and have a time of sharing and prayer. There are currently over 10,000 members of this Fraternity, comprising more than 400 groups in 45 countries. The Community has chosen to print on the jacket of each video a text by Couturier entitled 'The Invisible Monastery', in which he speaks of his vision of Christian people, an immense network encircling the world, meeting on Thursday nights ('in commemoration of that Great Thursday') to pray for unity – *Net for God*, as we call it: 'would that not be the dawn of Christian unity which was breaking upon the world?' It is our hope that in a small way we are helping to make this vision a reality.

'La souffrance de la séparation'

Couturier seems to have made a virtue out of the Vatican's robust warnings against 'false eirenicism'. For him the harshness of this language contained within it an important truth.

Division between Christians was a fundamental reality which should not be evaded or glossed over, and it was important for those who were committed to the work of prayer for unity to feel in their own hearts the pain of this division. In a striking text of 1949, he argued that ‘every Christian is responsible for his own church’, and that ‘happiness and suffering’ is the sign of any mature adult love. Christians should therefore be ready to accept this responsibility, following the example of the handmaid of the Lord: ‘may it be done to me according to Your will’. For Couturier therefore, individual believers were in a profound sense representative of, as well as responsible for, their own churches: this is the deeper significance of the many group photographs in his biographies showing lined-up ecumenical worthies in their diverse churchmen’s garb.

The prayer said by Chemin Neuf members every morning to ‘experience the pain caused by division’ has deeply marked the Community’s approach to ecumenism. Members of the Community are encouraged to anchor themselves in their own traditions, and their first duty of obedience is to their own churches. Thus, for example, in order to take life vows in the Chemin Neuf Community a member must seek the formal approval of his or her own church: the ensuing commitment therefore becomes not just an individual gesture but in some sense an act of corporate union. Nor has such permission always been easy to obtain, particularly for members of certain Protestant churches which are historically suspicious of all things Roman. When tensions arise, however, the Community commits itself to standing in the breach, bearing with the pain of division without trying to avoid or minimise it.

The Community’s practice with regard to inter-communion follows the same principle: every member of Chemin Neuf is encouraged to follow the rules of his or her own church, even when those rules may bring them into conflict. Catholic members are reminded that their church asks them not to receive communion in non-Catholic churches, although they are also encouraged to consider the demands of their own conscience (good Thomist moral theology!). In practice this means that some do, and some do not, receive; but the seriousness of the question precludes viewing either choice as an ‘easy option’. The Community also systematically asks – and commonly receives – permission from the local Catholic bishop to offer eucharistic hospitality to non-Catholics; the formal offer of such hospitality is now standard practice at many of Chemin Neuf’s houses in France. For their part, non-Catholic members respond in different ways to this offer: some are asked by their own churches not to receive communion, while most are free to accept or not as their own conscience dictates.

Overall the Community has discovered that while it is a joy to be able to share at the same table, the choice not to receive can also be a powerful and prayerful witness: truly a 'communion of desire'.

It is worth noting that Couturier's own approach to obedience has been described by his biographers as *scrupuleux*, but also *dialogante* and *contestataire*! Certainly he missed few opportunities to press the case for his work in private, and his voluminous correspondence with the Archbishop of Lyon (Cardinal Gerlier) displays an extraordinary stubbornness and determination which is almost wholly absent from his public writings. The strategic benefits of toeing the party line in public can of course be debated, in ecumenism as in any other sphere of political endeavour. However, while it is important for those working for the unity of Christians not to be naïve, it is equally important for such work to be founded on an awareness of human sinfulness that is not confined to one's impression of one's opponents, and on a willingness to accept the sad reality of present divisions, balanced by a prayerful determination to 'hope beyond all hope'. In this area, Couturier's example still has much to teach us.

'Spiritual emulation': encounter and formation

Couturier's notion of 'spiritual emulation' (first expressed as *parallélaboration*, a clumsily Teilhardian word of his own devising) underpinned his approach to the practice of ecumenism. Believers from different traditions should allow themselves to be inspired by the example of their 'holy rivals in charity', a process that necessarily takes place step by step:

'In order to unite you have to love one another, in order to love one another you have to know one another, in order to know one another you have to go to meet one another.' (cf. The *Testament* of Cardinal Mercier)

Those who chose to work for the unity of Christians should accept the need to meet with those from other traditions, to learn more about them, and to allow themselves to be changed by these encounters. Couturier himself enthusiastically practised what he preached, travelling widely (notably in England) despite his poor health, welcoming numerous visitors to Lyon, and maintaining a voluminous correspondence. On this note, it is interesting to observe the development over time in Couturier's own ecumenical interests. After his earliest contacts with Orthodox refugees in Lyon, he became interested in the 1930s in Anglo-Catholicism,

initially through contact with its extreme 'anglo-papalist' wing. In later years, however, his attention came increasingly to be focused on relations with the Reformed church. The creation of the *Groupe des Dombes*, comprising twenty Catholic and twenty Reformed theologians, was the fruit of a long evolution, and a testimony to Couturier's growing openness to traditions very different from his own.

Openness to others is of course a fundamental part of community life, and the Chemin Neuf Community is profoundly committed to bringing together people from different cultures and traditions, to enable them to share and to learn from one another. In an age of globalisation, this is perhaps most obvious in the area of reconciliation between nations: rare is the Chemin Neuf gathering that has less than a dozen nationalities present! Electronic media also make it easier to communicate than it was in Couturier's day. Laurent Fabre, the current leader of the Community, is an enthusiastic amateur cameraman, and the *Net For God* videos produced monthly for the International Ecumenical Fraternity contain regular Chemin Neuf news from around the world, from Egypt to the Philippines. More generally, simply living day to day with those of other religious traditions and cultures, and dealing with the inevitable tensions that arise as a result, is an invaluable lesson in openness and reconciliation.

Chemin Neuf is also committed more specifically to 'encounter and formation' in the area of ecumenism. On the simplest level, this means ensuring wherever possible that the Community's missions are led by an ecumenical team, and that invitations are sent out to those of different churches. Many young French Catholics attending the annual Youth Festival at the Abbaye d'Hautecombe in August have their first opportunity to meet Christians of other denominations, and to attend a Protestant celebration of communion: often they express their astonishment at how close it seems to the liturgy of the mass! Chemin Neuf's more formal study programmes also include significant ecumenical content. For example, the theology weekends run at the Abbaye des Dombes in collaboration with the Catholic University of Lyon try to include one Catholic and one non-Catholic speaker. In 2002-03 theology students studying the history of the Church, or delicate ethical questions such as divorce and remarriage, have been able to hear the perspectives of Catholic, Orthodox, Lutheran and Anglican speakers.

This is a side of the Community's work that is currently expanding, and the Chemin Neuf's Constitutions (recently revised) now formally commit members of the Community to making

contact with church leaders whenever they arrive in a new area, in order to put the Community's resources at their disposal. Members are also encouraged to commit to a programme of ecumenical study (formal or informal) in order to learn more about their brothers and sisters from different traditions, and to take advantage of any opportunity to worship in churches other than their own.

Conclusion

Looking back on Couturier's life and work, it is clear how much has changed since his death, and that a number of his dreams are now much nearer to being fulfilled. The fact that Couturier's friend, Pastor Roland de Pury, was unable to speak inside the church at his funeral, instead being obliged to deliver his oration from the steps afterwards, seems barely conceivable to those of us for whom pulpit exchanges, common celebrations and even a limited degree of inter-communion is now the norm. The man who had a vision of an 'invisible monastery' circling the globe praying for the unity of Christians would surely have rejoiced to see the work of Chemin Neuf's International Ecumenical Fraternity and other similar organisations.

And yet the challenges facing the Christian Churches have not diminished over the last fifty years. A new awareness of globalisation, sharpened by the ethnic wars and conflicts of the last decade of the twentieth century, have heightened the need for Christians to bring Christ's message of peace and reconciliation to all peoples, while encouraging Europeans (not least faced with the rapid decline in their own national churches) to ask some hard questions about their own faithfulness to the Gospel. The need for a renewed vision of the whole body of Christ that encompasses both a local and a global dimension has never been greater – and Christian disunity is widely recognised as the greatest impediment to evangelisation. It is therefore vital that Christians be prepared to risk their own identities and leave their comfort zones, by turning both to God and towards each other, ready to be surprised and delighted and changed by what they find.

Couturier's greatest gift to the present generation is surely the timelessness of his vision. Many of Couturier's contemporaries were much better theologians than he, and far more acute observers of the Christian scene; but their language has aged, and their pertinent observations are now fifty years or more out of date. In his concentration on the central themes of ecumenical spirituality – prayer, suffering, and the need to go beyond our

boundaries – Couturier's writings still have as much to say to us now as they did then. May his example continue to inspire a new generation of Christians to pray in the words of Jesus himself: 'Father, may they be one ...'

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