

The Unity of Christians: The Vision of Paul Couturier

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The Chemin Neuf Community and the Call to Unity

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The Chemin Neuf Community's distinctive vocation is to live the life of Unity, the life of reconciliation between people and between churches, with a special ministry towards couples and families, notably through the *Cana* sessions and the life of the Community's fraternities.

When members of the Chemin Neuf Community elects to make their definitive commitment, they take what could be termed a 'fourth vow' - to give one's life, to offer it for the Unity of Christians:

'Without waiting any longer, together - Catholics, Orthodox, Protestants - we choose the humble path of a common daily life' (1).

There is a sense of urgency here: 'without waiting any longer'. Yet it is an urgency whose way forward is ordinary, every day, reality: 'the humble path of a common daily life'. There is nothing to see but the daily round, the common task: prayer, service, work. And there are also the daily 'talking things over', the daily challenges. It is about ordinary life - but ordinary life lived *together*. Here is where we find our vocation to Unity. But saying 'ordinary' also implies a certain poverty, indeed even invisibility! So it is difficult to find the words that reveal what this living together is, and yet it is the right path to walk along day by day.

At one and the same time, the 'everyday' path of Christian Unity is a gift and a struggle. We realise more and more how we must take both these terms to heart. In fact, for us they are two key insights taught by the Abbé Paul Couturier. Our daily life is distinguished by the sheer diversity of the members of our Community - men and women, couples and unmarried people, all from different cultures and denominations. This is a treasury of resources; such a present! You do not choose the brothers and sisters you live with. You accept, you learn to recognise the other as a brother or sister, and to love that person because we all have the same Father in heaven. We choose to follow Christ together. It is he, after all, who brings us together - everything would be impossible otherwise. It is in approaching daily life like this that my prejudices and my fears will fall by the wayside. For little by little we learn to know one another, to know others in terms of the difference, as it ceases to be a threat to me and becomes instead a treasure, yet another aspect of the face of Christ which I am coming to discover. Like so many of the ecumenical pioneers, we discover the value

of recognising each other in our very difference, in friendship which does not go only so far as the point at which we diverge on theological grounds, but finds the way for grace to open up the path that lies ahead. For the nearer one draws to Christ, the nearer one draws to others.

Because Jesus himself has prayed for the Unity of his own, we know that it only remains for us to embrace, to enter into, this prayer which has already gone ahead of us and is his gift. It is a gift he renders to us, but which we surrender to him (*don et abandon*): 'according to your will, according to your means'. But the gift's significance can occasionally be a shock: we pray every day, 'grant us to experience the suffering caused by division, to see our sin, and to hope beyond all hope'. If only we could be truly shocked! If only we could realise more and more in Community, that there is no true vocation to Unity unless we recognise what separates us, and unless the separation is hurting. As long as we are content with things as they are, no transformation at all is possible. That prayer is fulfilled from the moment we are moved to the core of our being by the sin of disunity. That prayer is fulfilled from the moment we cease to justify our divisions and our conscience accepts how scandalous they really are. Then and only then does that potential path to Unity open up before us.

When fostering contacts with other Christians, and also when attending the Eucharistic celebrations of other Churches, we choose the path of communion with our Church and of obedience. One of the last phrases devised by the Abbé Couturier was, 'To all of us Christians, humility opens all barred routes.'⁽²⁾ So we preserve our solidarity with our Church, and we love the Church even when she does not seem to understand, or when she is being slow. In 1945, the Abbé Couturier was preparing to attend a meeting at Taizé. In the end, just when everything was ready, he was not allowed to go. He wrote to the conference,

'Both for you and for us there is only one possible attitude: glory be to God! A setback? What grace! What a test! There is some inner meaning which escapes us....Our march towards Unity has just taken a great step forward! God has permitted us a setback! He must therefore be preparing great things. We shall continue....with still more prayer and tenacity and submission to his will.'⁽³⁾

In 1949, in *Every Christian is Responsible for the Church*, he wrote, 'You do not love the Church if you do not know suffering from the Church, in the Church and for the Church.'⁽⁴⁾ We make our choice to remain in solidarity with our Church concerning the Lord's Supper (over the issue of Eucharistic sharing), permanent relations (to await as well as to initiate movement from our Churches), and the mutual recognition of ministry. Yet obeying the Lord's command that 'You shall love your neighbour as yourself' requires that 'you shall love your neighbour's Church as your own Church', as if it is your own. There is no rivalry in love. We have to relinquish all the conscious weighing up, the balancing act, the making allowances and excuses for ourselves on both sides. There is no rivalry in love. I have to be ready to do for my neighbour's Church what I am ready to do for my own. This is recognition in both meanings of the term - recognition in the sense of an act of generous acceptance, of joy; recognition in the sense of comprehending the position the other person is in, the position the other Church is in, and their gifts too.

The Chemin Neuf, our 'new path' towards the Unity of Christians is an unexpected vocation; and, like so many things we do not expect, at one and the same time it is a joy and a cross. A vocation from God, and so it is a present and, on occasion, a burden too. But we have no wish to forget that it is the very vocation bestowed and borne by the Christ who is also called a 'sign of contradiction'.

Sister Muriel d'Hoffschmidt is a member of the Communauté du Chemin Neuf at La Hulpe in Belgium. Her account of its life and witness in the Belgian situation was given at the colloquium in June 2003 at the English Convent in Brugge.

Notes

1. *Oecuménisme spirituel, Les écrits de l'abbé Paul Couturier*, edited with commentary by Maurice Villain, Preface by His Beatitude Maximos IV, Tournai, Casterman, 1963, p. 150.
2. In 1953. In: *Oecuménisme spirituel, Les écrits de l'abbé Paul Couturier* (op.cit.), p. 241.
3. Rouanet, J-B, *L'abbé Paul Couturier*, Angers, 1963, p.29. Also cited in: *Lumière et Vie*, no. 61, p.124.
4. *Oecuménisme spirituel, Les écrits de l'abbé Paul Couturier* (op.cit.), p. 142.