

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

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

**XVIII**

**Paul Couturier, the Week of Prayer, and the Unity of Humanity  
in Christ**

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**Introduction**

I would like to set the scene with three stories. First, when I came to live in London it was with the Cowley Fathers, the Anglican Society of St John the Evangelist in Tufton Street SW1. There was a small section of their retreat library dedicated to the translations of Fr Longridge's commentaries on St Ignatius Loyola's Spiritual Exercises into scores of languages (1). Apparently the book sold best in Spain, where it was inconceivable that Longridge was not a Roman Catholic priest and religious. Indeed Jesuits the world over proposed the Longridge commentaries as the best guide to the Exercises. Fashions have changed; but the fact remains that the rebirth of Anglican religious life brought in its train one of the most effective tools for opening up the life of the Spirit known to Roman Catholics, so that retreats and spiritual direction are immovable objects in the life of countless Anglican clergy and lay people. Moreover, so deep did they drink of this well that its waters were offered back and embraced, all unwittingly, as a gift from a new found Anglican spirituality to the heartlands of this classically Roman Catholic discipline.

Second - I had just left Durham. It was a matter of some amused exasperation that in the late 1970s the organist at the Cathedral had been granted permission to use music for the

Eucharist by the great composers of the Mass as a musical form - Byrd, Sheppard, Palestrina, Vittoria, Mozart and the others too - the condition being that every member of the congregation be supplied with a duplicated sheet containing the Latin with an English translation. The Mass, which had formed the basis for the development of the entire Western musical tradition, which had been the touchstone for taking sides at the Reformation, and whose music lies behind the whole concept of varied yet related movements in symphonies, concerti and other musical forms, was suspect because of its Catholic and papal associations. Nowadays, try to find an Anglican Cathedral where you are *unlikely* to find a Latin motet or a setting of the Mass by one of the great Renaissance or Classical composers; then try and find a Roman Catholic church beyond central London where you have any hope of finding the same. And what Catholic organist does not adore the genius and perfection of the Italian-trained Bach and his almost entirely Lutheran liturgical output; while any of the good Anglican organists find themselves transported through the language of music by - in my view - the profoundest systematic theologian of 20th century Catholicism - with all due deference to Karl Rahner and Hans Urs von Balthasar - Olivier Messiaen. (2) It is as though we have embraced each others' choicest traditions, even to adopting as our own some old treasures that were disregarded by the communities that had first inspired them.

Thus, a third story. Some years after I became a Roman Catholic and was subsequently serving once more as a priest, I was doing some supply in Suffolk. The parish priest there, a respected friend from Anglican days, who was now less than impressed with ecumenism with non-Roman Catholics, nevertheless continued to promote English hymnody. He certainly put the people through their paces and taught them classics so familiar to anyone brought up on the English Hymnal or Hymns Ancient and Modern - not to mention the true Methodist Hymn Book of 1933. Some of his lay people complained to me, 'Why do we have to have all these Anglican hymns?' One was by Isaac Watts (the famous Independent kept at a safe distance from London at Newington Green), and the other two were respectively by Hrabanus Maurus and Venantius Fortunatus (Catholics and poets whose lasting influence sped the momentum that became the Western hymn tradition). Conversely, it is mildly amusing that when it comes to funerals English Catholics disregard their own wealthy tradition and instead cling to their 'old rugged Cross' and raise the roof with the distinctly substitutionary praise for the Atonement found in 'How Great thou Art'. Not many Roman Catholic parishioners would know about the connection between St Anselm and persecuted Russian Baptists (3), or the thread that seems to link St John of the Cross, Charles Wesley, the American Revival

experience and the liturgical meltdown for Catholics after Vatican II in the hymn tradition as we have received it. But heart seems to have spoken to heart, and we instinctively know - with ever greater confidence - when we should adopt something from another tradition, pray through it, love it as our own, and even offer it back to those who gave it to us in the first place. Another friend, a vicar in the West Midlands, had a parish mission and it led to a visit to the Shrine of our Lady of Walsingham in Norfolk. His Black Country parishioners fell in love with our Lady and a beautiful image of the Virgin was subsequently installed in the Church with great fondness. The vicar heard from his RC opposite number who had told his mother what he thought was a lovely, ecumenical story of how Mary had come to be loved by his Anglican neighbours. She repeated it to two aunts - 'A Protestant minister praying to our Lady?' said one. 'Has he no shame?' said the other.

All of this shift in spirituality and prayer has not come about by decisions at the top. True, issues of doctrine, sacraments, worship and so on have been discussed at great depths, and the various documents and agreements whereby the Churches have been exploring each other for thirty years or more indicate a truly spiritual motivation. But in this they reflect currents that seem to flow regardless of ecclesiastical organization or policy. Speaking personally, as a child of a mixed marriage, I desired in the 1970s that the work of ARCIC should be realised there and then, that the separation between Catholics and the Church of England made no sense and should be repaired. But I was ignoring the human realities and the genuine rootedness and spiritual authenticity of so many different ways to be a member of the Anglican community, some of which had a long way to go before they could contemplate an encounter with the Church beyond, whether that was the successor of Peter or the successor of Wesley. I grew later to love the Church of England's distinctive take on things, its 'own brand' range of Catholic traditions, its Evangelical wing, which had to be respected, and the inspiring appeal of Arnold's Broad Church tradition. When I decided I ought to become a Roman Catholic, I remember Cardinal Hume saying, 'Bring the Church of England with you', and I was glad to realise that what looked to some like a comment of separatism, even betrayal, had a duty to become above all an ecumenical act - a sign for unity, even if a sign for the moment of contradiction.

Some who made the same step have not seen it this way, but I have been restless about the disunity and separation which has been brought to life through confronting the realities of the ecumenical journey. The Abbé Paul Couturier who died fifty years ago in March thought that

individual changes of Church belonging should be rare, as people should persevere and advance to Christ in their own doctrinal and spiritual traditions as the surest way of converging with others. (4) When it does not go like that, it is not without cost, hurt and misunderstanding for the individual and the communities relinquished and embraced. One has been determined to continue to engage with those with whom one was once in communion but is now separate from, not least since the Church of England now finds itself experiencing the realities of separation even within its bounds.

### **Ecumenism, a Journey in the Spirit**

Two and a half years ago a group of us Anglicans and Roman Catholics who maintain friendships through pilgrimage, study and prayer together, heard Professor Adelbert Denaux of Leuven plead with us to pray for the revival of ecumenism, in practical and spiritual ways. We heard of the present winter, but we felt that unity, regardless of the official negotiations and dialogues to move us on the way forward, was already a reality in music, arts, literature, spirituality, liturgical life, social action, despite the complex network of allegiances and constraints that hold us in place apart. A year later, we studied Geoffrey Curtis's book *Paul Couturier and Unity in Christ* (5). We immediately realised that Couturier's was a vision which we were being called to share and witness to. The 2003 conferences in Westminster and Brugge, the commemoration at Mass in Westminster Cathedral and this book are the result. (6)

In 2001, *Charta Oecumenica* called on us 'to acknowledge the spiritual riches of the different Christian traditions, to learn from one another and so... receive....gifts' (7). In May 2003, Focolare and Churches Together in England combined 'to present a lived experience of new life in the ecumenical structures'. And the Society for Ecumenical Studies, together with the Hertfordshire Newman Association and the St Albans Christian Study Centre joined forces for a major event (at which Cardinal Kasper and Archbishop Rowan Williams, Bishop Joe Aldred and Moderator Elizabeth Welch were the keynote speakers) with the following concerns in mind:

'Everyone is happy to affirm that Christian Unity is important, but in reality progress is slow and often churches seem to have become focused only on the theological and institutional issues. There is a need for renewed energy in all aspects of the search for unity, and a new emphasis on a shared experience of prayer, social action,

engagement with the Bible, and the expression of the gospel in and through the creative arts. The conference aims to stimulate, encourage and inspire a renewed commitment to discovering a form of unity which is practical and achievable in the next generation.’ (8)

Last year, the same Adelbert Denaux gave a paper at the ecumenical monastery of Bose in Italy on the Holy Spirit in Ecumenism (9), indicating a strong sense of the role of the Holy Spirit not only in the life of the Church, its mission, its proclamation and its divinely instituted organization, but also (equally essentially) in the growing life in Christ of the individual Christian. This implies the authenticity of spiritual tradition in one's community, and known pathways leading to union with Christ. Again the recent Special Commission on Orthodox Participation in the WCC, has helped Churches to look afresh at their spiritual, devotional, doctrinal and liturgical traditions not as interchangeable modes or expedient components of what could be reducible to a common, basic template, but as true manifestations in their own right, as very different as they may be, of the life of the Church in fullness, in grace, in truth. (10)

### **Parallélaboration**

Couturier believed in a theory of what he called *parallélaboration* (11). He did not believe that unity could be achieved through simple merger or by finding the lowest common denominator and proceeding from there. On the other hand, it is true that he felt strongly that what keeps us apart is not stronger than that which is drawing us together, and the immense influence of Dom Lambert Beauduin's Liturgical Movement on him caused him to go back to his own tradition's origins, but this was to find his own growing roots, not the mere bare rock (12). What he felt strongly was that every one should be faithful to their own tradition of prayer, belief and spiritual progress, in order to start out on embracing and comprehending those of others. Christians should use this as the starting point to talk with each other and try to understand why things were different, differently put, differently held. They would therefore work through their own journey to Christ in parallel with each other, even if the paths were not the same.

This is far from a recipe for complacency. For it assumes definite movement towards Christ. For those who are genuinely one in Christ the separation from one another is, as it were, non-factual. Couturier was fond of quoting Metropolitan Platon Gorodetsky of Kiev, 'The walls

of separation do not reach as far as heaven'. (13) In other words, from the perspective of the Holy Trinity the Church is not only one, it is indivisible and its separations do not exist. The experience of separation in the world and therefore the way in which we speak of separate 'Churches' is an instance of sin, its pain a torment to us and affront to the sovereignty and providence of God. The sin, and our experience of it, prevent our union with Christ and hence our unity with each other. On the other hand, they afflict us, as St Paul was afflicted before Damascus, to desist from striving against the work of Christ and his high priestly prayer on the night before he died that we should be one. And so they goad us on in a struggle to overcome sin, separation, and disunity.

### **The Unity of Christians for the Unity of Humanity – *Le Milieu Divin***

And for Couturier this was not because these were phenomena or obstacles to be overcome, more that they are irrelevancies to the objectivity of the Unity of God, the Unity of Creation in Christ, the Unity of the Church as the image par excellence of the Unity of Humanity. From the outset, since he decided to move on from the mainly Roman focus of the older Church Unity Octave (14) to a concept of unity that accounted for all Christians in the framework of a theology of creation and universal redemption, he followed Christ's prayer by not asking for unity in the sense of mere community or fraternity or togetherness, but that the unity of his followers should not only resemble but be a manifestation of the unity of the Father and the Son. And as this is the bond of the Spirit, there should be complete freedom of spiritual exchange and existence in and through the life, experience and nature of the disciples 'that they may be in us, as you are in me and I am in you'. Furthermore, the context of all this - Unity for Christians and indeed the Unity of the Persons of the Trinity - is the created world – 'may they be one....that the world may believe.'

This, to me, breathtaking and sweeping vision of the unity of Creator and created as the point and the circumstances of God, humanity, Church and life itself is deeply reminiscent of the dedication of Teilhard de Chardin's *Milieu Divin* – 'To those who love the world' (for God so loved the world). (15) Perhaps this is no accident. Couturier was a science teacher who had fallen under the spiritual influence of Fr Albert Valensin SJ who had given him Loyola's Spiritual Exercises at a number of retreats in the early 1920s. Valensin had liberated the young priest from a besetting sin of French Catholicism, the so-called *intégrisme* whose proclamation of 'the truth' looked doctrinally pure, obedient and faithful at first glance, but

was really about a sterile, ungrowing sealed unit unrelated to time or context, belonging to battles, issues and circumstances of the ever receding past. Geoffrey Curtis wrote:

‘Paul Couturier learned to recognize the all-embracing truth of the primacy of charity, a truth which he already carried unconsciously in his heart: and together with this came a new conception of progress towards the Truth, a conception no longer static but dynamic, a sense not only of the cosmos as in process of continuous creation, but of mankind as having the work of caring for the Seed entrusted to it and of labouring for its development. For all this, no Damascus Road conversion was required. He needed only to be true to himself and to the new light given him. Henceforth he was guarded against *intégrisme* by the sense that progress in the attainment of truth is to be found, but its finding is conditioned by faith in the primacy of charity.’ (16, 17)

By coincidence Albert’s brother Auguste, also a Jesuit priest (18), was a close confidant of Teilhard and did much to support him when he lost his licence to teach and was exiled to China prior to writing the *Milieu Divin*, with its unforgettable impression of not the appearance of Christ but his transparence throughout the universe, the cosmic dynamic Christ who does not merely shine on the world but shines through it, sanctifying it, relating it to the activity of God himself, divinising it - sanctifying, summarising and divinising all humanity in whose nature Christ shares in all the fulness of his Godhead. (19)

So *parallélaboration* is not a recipe for complacency, but nor is it a call to mere human endeavour. It is nothing short of being a function of and a factor in the divine milieu - the active communion of God, the activity of God in the world, to be at the point and in the environment of God. Couturier had already become aware of the sterility, or at least potential sterility, of traditional methods of prayer and perfection in holiness. The physicist, he warmed to Teilhard’s vision of the holiness of matter, of its spiritual power, of how it grows and diminishes, of attachment and detachment from life and matter, of the essential naturalness of transfiguration, cross and resurrection, of the presence of God in all and through all.

Although judged orthodox, publication of Teilhard’s book was nevertheless banned by Rome as it was held to be too demanding of the faithful. Couturier would distribute duplicated copies of the unpublished transcripts among his friends, students and correspondents. It is perhaps clear where his immense vision of Unity came from, where his deep conviction of

the physicality of the pain of separation and the torment of the sin of disunity, originated. They are the experience of human resistance to the very existence of the Trinity and the way in which that flows through the life of creation.

### **Suffering, the Reality of Disunity**

In an extraordinary meditation he wrote:

Grant that all Christians may love one another without reserve.

You alone can bring this to pass.

Grant that we may love you with an unbounded love.

The things which we have in common - your Book, your Baptism,  
our faith in you, in your incarnation, in your redemption, and indeed many other  
beliefs,

all this unites us indissolubly,  
making us in you, and through you,  
children of your Father.

But the things which separate us  
unite us even more closely - though in a different way -  
than the things which we have in common.

For the things which separate us are the causes of intense suffering,  
the suffering of being separated in our thoughts concerning your Church.

And there is nothing that draws us together  
and unites us more closely than suffering.

O Christ, make us suffer so intensely by reason of our separation  
that your prayer within us may penetrate us,  
may take possession of us,  
have free course in us,  
and ascend to your Father. (20)

I have wondered whether this piety of embracing suffering in so forthright a way is not inappropriate to the spiritual insights of our day, looking back as we do with no nostalgia for the days of pointless spiritual guilt, physical mortification, inhuman and Jansenist preference for unpleasant effort in order to merit relief and the hearing of our prayers. The truth is that we are rich people who 'cannot pass through the eye of a needle' and have forgotten our

sense of sin, the harm it does, the graces it prevents, the defiance it stands for. We have even forgotten how to feel genuine and heartfelt sorrow. CS Lewis was initially fond of saying that suffering was God's megaphone to a deaf world, but this is not what Couturier, I think, genuinely felt. He knew spiritually about the great movement toward God which called upon us all not to shrink from sanctification - not simply for ourselves, a mere technique, but for others. It was a real sense of urgency, anxiety, but most of all *com-~~p~~assion* that alarmed him, as Christians placed their barriers up before the power of the living Christ, as the world was thus insulated from the very blessing of its creator. His tract every year read:

*'A First Fact*

We have a Christian world, of (many millions of) people, divided into at least four groups - Catholics, Orthodox, Protestants and Anglicans. There are many millions more who are not Christians, yet the Body of Christians is meant to realize the unity of all humanity under the Creator. Divided, it fails to express this unity.

This division has resulted in rivalry or opposition, or at least divergences, in the proclamation of the Gospel in mission situations.

This leads in turn to astonishment, or bewilderment, or hesitation among those who are being evangelised in non-Christian countries.

It also causes surprise, and rejection of the gospel, in so-called Christian countries.

It means suffering and frustration on the part of those who are seeking the truth.

It weakens the spiritual power of Christianity to lead and inspire the world.

It intrudes ugliness and disharmony into the work of Christ by the separations that exist among Christians.

It means the Body of baptised Christians is not seen to be worshipping the Trinity together.

It means the mutilation of the work of God.

It holds back the 'anxious longing of the whole creation for the manifestation of the sons of God'.

*A Second Fact*

We are face to face with a new historical phenomenon, unique in the history of Christianity. Proceeding from all Christian confessions, independent but parallel to one another, immense spiritual forces of intercession now converge in a single immeasurable distress over the separation of Christians, and a single intense desire:

the coming of the visible Unity of the Kingdom of God:  
according to Christ's will, according to his means.

*A Certainty*

Conceived in the movement of hearts which turn towards their one Saviour Jesus Christ, how could the union of all Christians fail to be achieved one day in the perfect atonement of Unity? There is certainly no question here of Unity sold at reduced prices, based on a 'lowest common denominator' of faith.

It is rather a question of the Unity for which Christ prayed and continues to pray eternally. For any other unity would be a treachery which all Christians would reject with horror.' (21)

In other words, the Church - one to God, but endlessly dividing itself up before the world - is in the way of the world's view of God. To God, with all its separations, it is of such limited use.

It is interesting to note that perhaps we have our English translation of 'the Week of Prayer for Christian Unity' wrong. The unity is there, and the Church is one. There isn't a work of God yet to be completed called 'Christian Unity', as though this were something that could exist as a phenomenon in its own right. Couturier called it the Week of Prayer for the Unity of Christians. (22) Christ is one, the Church is One, Holy, Catholic and Apostolic - but it is individual sin as Christians, and our sort of *esprit de corps* of sin as separate communities of Christians, that paints a different picture. Interestingly, discussions in the World Council of Churches and various national bodies have highlighted this same problem - the manifestation of unity through various bodies and councils, belonging to no one church group, but apart from and even over against all - far better to speak of Churches Together. Perhaps a better shorthand for the 'Week of Prayer for Christian Unity' would be 'Christians Together', placing the responsibility firmly where it originates in the Christian's own sin and reluctance to co-operate with divine grace.

So the sorrow and intense suffering of which Couturier speaks is real contrition, it is true emotional pain, it is genuine sensing of human unfulfilment, it is bitter disappointment ('and o'er its own shortcomings weeps with loathing', (23) poignantly wrote Bianco da Siena), it is a knowing regret. Couturier also spoke of the costliness and physical price. His own health broke under the pressure of and because of his work - he believed many expended their lives

in the service of unity, and was convinced that God had used the power of some people's death and suffering - even terminal illness - as a treasury from which to draw in order to endow the movement for Christian unity.

### **Sanctification, the Purpose of Praying for Unity**

For it is not simply about achieving unity, or righting wrongs, or doing God's will, or following Christ, or avoiding scandal, or loving God and neighbour as self, though it is all those things. Couturier saw it above all as the quest for sanctification. The sanctity had to come from somewhere, and principally this meant from the immense treasures and resources that God has already bestowed on his Bride the Church. This is the prayer of nuns, it is the love of those who meet the needs of the poor, it is the perseverance of Christians. It is also the sacrifice of those who live and die in Christ, those whose function and ministry is known to God alone, those whose prayer life is difficult and laborious, those who cannot see their faith plainly but in the darkness trust. Those who make themselves of no reputation, despised, rejected, men of sorrows, wrapt in grief. (24)

It is worth noting that in Couturier's annual scheme of prayer he only prays incidentally for unity, largely as he sees it exists without our praying for it. Above all he prays for sanctification. Here is the typical format:

#### General Intention for the Week of Prayer

*The Unity of all Christians desired by Christ for his Church*

#### Suggested Intentions for Each Day - First Scheme (1936 onwards) (25)

18 January

*Unity of all Christians*

19 January

*Sanctification of Catholics*

20 January

*Sanctification of Orthodox*

21 January

*Sanctification of Anglicans*

22 January

*Sanctification of Lutherans*

23 January

*Sanctification of Calvinists*

24 January

*Sanctification of all other Protestant Christians*

25 January

*Unity of all humanity in the charity and truth of Christ*

Suggested Intentions for Each Day - Second Scheme (1946, and 1953 onwards) (26)

18 January

*Unity of all Christians*

19 January

*Sanctification of Catholics*

20 January

*Sanctification of Orthodox*

21 January

*Sanctification of Anglicans*

22 January

*Sanctification of all Protestant Christians*

23 January

*Sanctification of all Jews*

24 January

*Sanctification of all other non-Christians (especially Muslims from 1953)*

25 January

*Unity of all humanity in the charity and truth of Christ*

The amazing thing is that from the outset, the reason for pleading for the unity of Christians was the need of the world and the unity of all humanity in the one Creation of Christ. It is as fresh and as urgent today as in 1934 when he began. At a time when Jews, Muslims and Christians in the Middle East face separations that may not be healed for centuries, and when the world of Islam braces itself at the thought of renewed onslaught from those they still see as Crusaders, (27) Couturier's vision of Christ and the prayer, because of him and how it is He who 'fills the universe', that all may be sanctified is the most positive and dynamic work we can do in his service.

We do not pray so much for ourselves, or for more people to become Christians *like us* or for the victory of our vision of Church and Society to prevail. Christ is not about triumph - he is among us as one who serves, who dies, who draws all to himself when he is lifted up. When we lift him up in the prayer for the Unity of Christians, it is because we pray for the world - with no strings attached - simply because he loved it and gave himself up for it.

### **The Triangle of Prayer for Unity**

This is why Couturier prayed for unity ‘according to your will, according to your means’. It is not for us to prescribe how it shall be, when it shall be, or what it shall look like. We should and do, of course, make plans and dream our dreams practically, but we know it is a spiritual work and how it shall be realised beyond the present painful illusions of earthly separation we cannot yet tell, but we have faith that this is part of God’s plan for himself, his people and for all the world. But we can at least make some further steps.

To this end Couturier, in his first article in 1935, proposed what he called a triangle of prayer:  
(28)

‘The prayer of Christians for Unity - which is neither of specifically Catholic nor Protestant origin, and which no group of Christians must monopolise - rests upon three pillars:

1. The prayer of personal and corporate confession, sustained by all in humility, prayer and penitence, which are independent but convergent.

*“If only, since the separation of Christians, there had been compensation - an immense, intense, inexhaustible expiation by means of humble prayer and penitence. But no. Up to this moment there is no great general movement, no new style of crusade in which the countless armies of the faithful, the cross of reunion on their breast, take for their weapons humiliation for admitted sin - humiliation, prayer and penitence.”* (29)

2. The necessarily ecumenical aim of this convergence. It is unity with all in Christ that each group of Christians is seeking.

*“We understand the Week of Universal Prayer for the Unity of Christians as a convergence of each Christian confession in full liberty and independence;  
but as excluding anything far or near which could harm the spiritual independence or liberty of any.  
To keep the Week of Prayer is to make spiritual preparation for the Reunion desired by the very manner of praying for it.” (30)*

3. The scrupulous conservation of the radical independence of the theological traditions in the various groups of Christians, despite their common ecumenicity.

*“In a region, fresh and lofty, reached by the transcending of self,  
we recover the gentle peace of Christ,  
a peace now found sweeter, more penetrating and more secret,  
radiant with the light of Tabor.  
Where is the spirit leading us? We do not know. He breathes where he wills.  
We only know that it is he who leads, and that is enough for us.” (31)*

This may be called the Triangle of the Week of Prayer, which has for its goal a general Reunion about which we know nothing else except that God desires it, since Christ has prayed for Unity.’

### **Spiritual Emulation and the Invisible Monastery**

We have spoken of *parallélaboration*; a further step for him was ‘spiritual emulation’, whereby Christians adopted for their own not an amalgam of various religious and spiritual elements derived from everywhere in general but nowhere in particular, but the specific facets and insights of separated Christians. ‘Bring the CofE with you’, said Cardinal Hume (32); Baptists in Luton taking a youth group for a weekend of monastic life at Turvey (33); Anglicans tending to prefer icons to statues, Orthodox and Westerners breathing together as a pair of lungs once more. I am grateful to Dr Tim Watson, formerly of the University of

Newcastle, now an Anglican member of the Communauté du Chemin Neuf, for pointing out that, at the time of Couturier's writing, there was a proliferation of meetings, groups and classes to promote 'emulation' of all kinds of pastimes, hobbies and skills among the French at leisure. Nowadays it may be aromatherapy, Salsa dancing or celebrity-inspired cookery; then it could have been photography, or entomology (at which, incidentally, some of the Cowley Fathers became distinguished). Couturier's appeal was thus well understood when he commended seeking new insights, guidance, and training from other Christian church people in a *spiritual* context. So, far from those from different churches being in competition with each other, they could unite in spurring each other on in excelling at growth in the life of Christ; indeed the Vatican II Degree on Ecumenism picked up a phrase familiar to the Abbé, when it recommended we should engage on a 'fraternal rivalry' on the path to Unity.

Thus he invited all Christians to experience this in 'The Invisible Monastery', that area beyond earth's divisions where we all meet in Christ in heaven, where we are undivided brothers and sisters free to pray and act and hope together as one.

Let some of the words of Couturier speak for themselves about it:

'It is for all Christians to embark upon holy emulation of their brothers and sisters in humble, penitent prayer and the deepening of the spiritual life.' (34)

'The prayer of Christ, and the spirit of this prayer in our life, ought to animate, quicken and possess the soul of any Christian who approaches the Saviour, whether in the solitude of mental prayer, or in sacramental life, or in participation in the eucharistic feast.

If every Thursday evening, the night of Holy Thursday, an ever-increasing multitude of Christians of every confession would form, as it were, an immense net embracing the earth like a vast invisible monastery in which all could be absorbed in prayer to Christ for Unity, would we not have here the dawn of Christian Unity? Is it not this attitude of spiritual emulation, sincere, profound, ardent, which the Father awaits for the realisation of the visible unity of the Body of the Church, for the accomplishment of the miracles necessary for the reunion within his visible Church of all those who love him and have been visibly marked by the seal of baptism?' (35)

‘It is no good dreaming that there will come *first* a realization of the unity of minds in Truth and *then* a union of hearts in Charity ... Charity is the herald of Truth ... It is clear enough that the unity desired by Christ is an organic unity, such as will grasp and gather into his heart the soul of humanity in its entirety. The unity of Christian will necessarily bring with it a unity of thought, of faith, of creed, since in all Christians it is the unique thought of their one Saviour which will develop itself. *But that is the end and not the beginning...*

The whole fabric of Christianity must be shaken to its very depths by the universal prayer of Christians: it must experience a supernatural shock which will break down all its prejudices, rectify its false and superficial ideas, cause hearts to grow into one another and finally unite minds in the eternal light of the one Christ. It will be a sort of second Pentecost descending on Christians “unanimous in prayer”. ’ (36)

‘Each Christian group, Catholics among them, will deepen its life, will make the best of its talents, will reform what needs reforming in it, will mount towards our Lord until the walls of separation are left behind. Then all recognizing in their brothers and sisters that Christ whom they adore, will see him as he is, one, undivided in his love, his life and his thought. Then it will be found that dogmatic unity has come, the full allegiance of all souls to the one mind of Christ. Union will be proclaimed by the voice of the church leaders - and by the voice of Peter.’ (37)

## **Conclusion**

Well can this be achieved?

A final story. Fr Henry Brandreth, an Anglican priest from Sheffield (he was later chaplain of the Anglican Church in Paris), recounted this story of the Abbé’s visit to Ars: (38)

‘We were there on one occasion when a terrifying thunder-storm and rain-storm broke. A group of tourists - tourists, not pilgrims - came into the church to take shelter from the rain, talking and laughing quite loudly. Father Couturier had for more than an hour been a small frail figure kneeling motionless in prayer. He never moved at the

interruption, but about fifteen minutes later, when the rain cleared, each of these tourists was kneeling behind him.’

‘According to your will, according to your means’? We could do worse than to kneel behind Father Couturier.

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#### Notes

1. *The Spiritual Exercises of St Ignatius of Loyola*, translated from the Spanish with a commentary and a translation of the *Directorium in Exercitia* and Commentary by W H Longridge SSJE, 4th ed. London and Oxford, Mowbray, 1950.
2. Messiaen said he could see the colours of notes and pitch. Also he conceived of his music, and the notes which it comprises, as having precise mathematical value. Consequently the pitch of a note, its length and colour (by comparison, a colour on any website has a number value by which it is recognised by a browser), mean that a tune or chord, or sequence, or entire piece, has a quantity. This can sometimes correspond to a letter, or letters, of the alphabet. This indicates that Messiaen’s great concert suites (for example, on the Nativity, the Ascension, Pentecost, or the *Livre du Saint-Sacrement*) on one level can be interpreted as systematic credal statements. They are also, quite conversely, acts of contemplation in which the Spirit blows where it lists - not least through the extensive incorporation of quotations from birdsong (some of it from the Holy Land) as the uncomposed music of the natural order.
3. *How Great thou art* was written by Carl Boberg in Swedish. Adapted into German, Polish, Hungarian and Russian forms it was taken to sub-Carpathian Russia by a daring missionary, Stuart K. Hine, between the two World Wars. In the late 1940s he translated it into English, and Dr Billy Graham popularised it at his missions. Permission to use the English text stipulates that the ‘substitutionary’ verse is not to be omitted from printed versions.
4. *Spiritual Testament*, Paul Couturier, Lyon, 1952. Given in Appendix A in *Paul Couturier and Unity in Christ*, Geoffrey Curtis CR, London SCM Press Ltd, 1964, section 11.
5. *Paul Couturier and Unity in Christ*, Geoffrey Curtis CR, London, SCM Press Ltd, 1964.
6. For full details, consult the website <http://www.paulcouturier.org.uk>
7. *Charta Oecumenica*, Conference of European Churches & the Council of European Bishops’ Conferences, St Gallen and Geneva, 2001, section 3. The text is also available on the website <http://www.cec-kek.org/>
8. From the promotional brochure. Full details of the day and the addresses (by Rowan Williams, Archbishop of Canterbury, and Cardinal Walter Kasper, President of the Pontifical Council for Promoting the Unity of Christians) may be found on the website <http://www.sfes.org.uk>
9. *The Holy Spirit and Ecumenism*, Adelbert Denaux, Bose, Italy, October 18 2002. To be published by the Suenens Centre. See the website <http://www.suenens.org/> for a report and the Conference statement.
10. St John 1.14.
11. Paul Couturier, op. cit., section 17.

12. See *Liturgy, the Life of the Church*, Lambert Beauduin OSB, The Liturgical Press, Collegeville, 1926 & St Michael's Abbey, Farnborough, 2002.
13. *Souvenirs*, Metropolitan Eulogius of the Academy of St Sergius, Paris, ed. T. Manouchina, Paris, Y.M.C.A., 1947, p. 576, recalling the author's meeting with Couturier in 1934.
14. In 1934, Couturier's new take on the Octave sanctioned by the Vatican in 1916 was extended from three days to a whole week, and the modern 'Week of *Universal Prayer for the Unity of Christians*' (i.e. no longer a Week of exclusively Roman Catholic Prayer) was born. Nowadays it is devised by a joint committee mandated by the World Council of Churches and the Pontifical Council for Promoting Christian Unity.
15. John 3.16. *Le Milieu Divin*, Pierre Teilhard de Chardin, William Collins Sons & Co Ltd, London, 1960.
16. Curtis, op.cit., p. 40.
17. Anyone who appreciates Vatican II's understanding of the 'hierarchy' of truths and the impetus towards unity from the mutual influences of distinctive friends ('fraternal rivalry' as Vatican II calls it - again echoing something the Abbé himself said), will see how deep rooted the idea is and how influential Couturier came to be. See the Decree on Ecumenism, *Unitatis Redintegratio*, 11, 1964.
18. The sense of coincidence is intensified: in 1924, when Teilhard returned from China to the *Institut Catholique* in Paris, he lectured at a number of colleges and met a young woman geologist who became a dear friend, Ida Treat, an American and avowed atheist. She was married to a leading member of the French Communist Party and future director of *L'Humanité* (the Communist newspaper), named Paul Vaillant-Couturier.
19. For an excellent introduction to Teilhard de Chardin's thought, see *Spirit of Fire*, Ursula King, Orbis Books, Maryknoll New York, 1996.
20. Curtis, op.cit., p. 310. The prayer is from a meditation given at the opening of an ecumenical Bible study circle in Lyon (undated).
21. Curtis, op.cit., ch.9. A good archive of the tracts, and other writings associated with Couturier, has been maintained by the Anglican Benedictine nuns of the Community of the Holy Cross at Rempstone, near Loughborough, Leicestershire, including translations of the early tracts for circulation in England.
22. *Semaine de Prière Universelle pour l'Unité des Chrétiens*, the title used for the first time in 1939
23. From *Come down, O Love divine*, the translation by R.F. Littledale of *Discendi, Amor santo* by Bianco da Siena (d. 1434). It is a deeply loved hymn in England, sung in all denominations to a tune by Ralph Vaughan Williams.
24. An allusion not only to Scripture, but to the text of the *Messiah*, Handel's great Oratorio, and one of its arias. In England it is a great event, popular with churches and by secular musicians alike, to gather in Advent or Holy Week, to join together with an orchestra, or organist, professional soloists and a conductor to sing the *Messiah*, with hardly any rehearsal. So well known are the choral sections that the performance is at the same time enjoyable and quite devotional.
25. Curtis, op.cit., p. 105.
26. Ibid. In 1952 and 1953, the Tracts were actually edited and distributed by Maurice Villain S.M., Couturier's disciple. He it was who took the message of the Week of Universal Prayer to Morocco, imbued with the strong principle of his mentor that the Church includes the whole human race, all creation. It is worth noting, however, that by 1957 Father Pierre Michalon, representing a different strand among the bearers of Couturier's torch, had removed (he was later to attend the Second Session as a curial official in the Secretariat for the Unity of Christians, where he played a decisive role in bringing Couturier's teaching right into the heart of the Church's life) the references to non-Christians, and inserted two new petitions - one concerning 'Suffering in the face of divisions', and another for the 'Sanctification of Mission Churches', a decisive shift of emphasis. I am grateful to Professor Paul McPartlan for pointing out that Couturier's thinking about the Church's - and Christ's - relation to all humanity, all creation is profoundly in sympathy with the teaching of Vatican II's Pastoral Constitution on the

- Church in the Modern World, *Gaudium et Spes*, chapter 22, 'Christ the New Man' (a passage which is also, he points out, quoted or referred to in all but one of John Paul II's encyclicals).
27. An associate of the writer's had reason to telephone the Royal Jordanian Embassy to enquire about the country's religious broadcasting. Jordan provides for RE in support of all its religious groups, and this includes Christians. The question was whether this extends to network broadcast RE programmes. The representative patched the call through to Amman, where an official took it and consulted a colleague, asking, 'What programmes have we done recently for Crusader children?' This was a reference to indigenous Arab Christians whose ancestors were doubtless settled in the region long before the Arabs themselves arrived with Islam. Nothing is meant by the term, but it is salutary for Western Christians to remember how they are seen and routinely stereotyped.
  28. *Pour l'unité des Chrétiens: psychologue de l'Octave de prière du 18 au 25 au 25 Janvier*, Paul Couturier, in *Revue apologetique*, 1935, pp. 684-703 (cited in Curtis, op.cit., pp.73-77).
  29. Ibid. (cited Curtis, op.cit., p. 74)
  30. Ibid., loc. cit.
  31. *Pour l'unité des Chrétiens: psychologue de l'Octave de prière du 18 au 25 au 25 Janvier*, Paul Couturier, in *Revue apologetique*, 1935, pp. 684-703 (quoted in Curtis, op.cit., p.76).
  32. In an address in 1994 to Anglican clergy contemplating leaving the Church of England to become Roman Catholics - Hume was keen to be welcoming and accommodating, but also to banish any love of schism, separation, rivalry, ingratitude or uncharity towards a sister church. He warned Catholics and would-be Catholics alike, 'The purposes of the Catholic Church in this country are not served by a weak Church of England.'
  33. The project of the Luton Churches Education Trust. Turvey is home to Olivetan Benedictine Monks. A community associated with the vision of Dom Constantine Bosschaerts, it is the home of the English ecumenical studies journal, *One in Christ*.
  34. Tract of 1941, Paul Couturier (quoted in Curtis, op.cit., p. 100). This is the first mention in the tracts of Couturier's key principle of 'spiritual emulation'. Ibid. (quoted in Curtis, op.cit., p.101). Canon Richard Rutt (the former Anglican Bishop of Leicester and now a retired Roman Catholic priest in the diocese of Plymouth), when a student after the Second World War, met Couturier on several occasions. He believes that the idea of 'fraternal rivalry', in which brothers and sisters in Christ 'vie' with each other in pursuit of spiritual emulation, came from Dom Columba Marmion, the Irish abbot of Maredsous in Belgium, whose immense spiritual influence must have been very familiar to Mercier and the Monks of Unity. Interestingly, in the Encyclical *Deiparae Virginis Mariae* Pope Pius XII, in exploring the possibility of formally defining the Catholic understanding of Mary's Assumption as a dogma of faith, asks his fellow bishops, as successors of the Fathers of Vatican I who had initially made a formal request for this, to unite with him 'in pious competition' to seek heavenly light on the subject.
  35. Tract of 1939, Paul Couturier (quoted in Curtis, op.cit., pp. 98-99). See also [www.paulcouturier.org.uk](http://www.paulcouturier.org.uk)
  36. Article in *Reunion V* (in English translation), 1947, pp.227-31, quoted in Curtis, op.cit. p.93; cf. *Spiritual Testament*, Paul Couturier, Lyon, 1952, section 13.
  37. From the BBC radio broadcast on 22 January 1961, *The Way of Life*, which brought together (among others) Fr Maurice Villain S.M., Fr Geoffrey Curtis C.R., Bishop Oliver Tomkins of Bristol, Max Thurian, Fr Brandreth, Professor Leon Zander and Miss Maisie Spens to recall Couturier during the Week of Prayer just eight years after his death.