

Roman Catholicism and Ecumenism

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Introduction

The general ecumenical concern is implicit in the universality suggested by the title "Roman Catholic Church" and has been especially one of her goals since the Protestant Reformation. It is evident, however, that attention to a rapprochement with non-Roman bodies has assumed new and different proportions since the call for Vatican II was issued by Pope John XXIII. That is to say, within the past five years the Catholic Church has ventured to acknowledge that the divisions within Christendom were not the simple result of perversity upon the part of the separated bodies, but rather that schisms within the Church came, in part at least, as the result of empirical factors within the history of Roman Catholicism itself.

It is the purpose of this article to note, first, significant shifts in emphasis in the Catholic Church in recent days which are designed to lessen the tensions between her and non-Roman bodies. Second, attention will be given to concrete steps being taken toward the removal of impediments to the reunion of Christendom. Third, notice will be taken of several elements, some negotiable, some irreducible, which remain as barriers to the reuniting of the world-wide Christian Church.

I

One of the most conspicuous shifts within Roman Catholic emphasis in the past several years has been the shift away from her historic triumphalism, toward a more empirical view of the Church. The typical triumphalist stance would maintain that the Church exists now in her full authority and glory, awaiting only the recognition of these by the world. Her magisterial or teaching function lay simply in the presentation of infallible and finished Truth. Her ultimate triumph was assured by her supposed mandate given by her Lord through St. Peter, so that its fulfillment was but a question of time.

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Dame in March, 1966, this writer was surprised to note the freedom with which responsible spokesmen for the Church recognized that the fullness of the Roman Church's mission is limited by empirical facts and elements. Not only so; but as well, it was made explicitly clear that the Church herself stood and stands under the judgment of the Word.

Another trend in a similar direction is the recognition of the real existence of "the People of God" in the non-Roman churches. Granted, the Constitutions of Vatican II sought to set safeguards around the Catholic Church's claim to be *the true Church*; but it regards the "separated brethren" *as brethren*. It is allowed that these may be part of "the Church" while remaining in the churches, so long as their non-recognition of the uniqueness of the Roman Church stems from the inertia of older habits of thought, and not from perverseness.

Further, the Constitution entitled "The Declaration of Religious Freedom" marks a significant advance from the older view that "error has no rights." The document is involved, and is not satisfactory to all. But it does reflect a personalistic view of the believing (or non-believing) person so that even the person in error has rights which are to be safeguarded. At the center, the Roman Church is on record as repudiating its right to repress public expressions of non-Catholic belief and worship in the name of the "common good" even in such a land as Spain, in which formerly religious monism was regarded as an integral public element, to be protected by the coercive action of the government. When fully implemented, this Constitution should make profound changes in public order, particularly in the Latin countries.

II

The Catholic Church is currently making a self-conscious attempt to remove, through concrete measures, impediments which currently militate against mutual understanding with non-Roman bodies. Some of these measures are more formal, others are of an informal and popular nature.

Among the former may be noted two in particular. Realizing that confusion, not to say apprehension, has resulted from some former pronouncements of the Vatican, notably the Syllabus of Errors issued at the close of Vatican I, Catholic spokesmen are cautiously acknowledging that the Syllabus of Errors was prepared by a defensive Church, and that it was addressed *ad hoc* to a situation which no longer exists, at least in the form of 1870. That the larger question of papal infallibility is involved is not made prominent, while much is made of the supposed linguistic ambiguities within the document itself.

Another attempt at allaying conflict between the Roman Church and the "separated" churches is concerned with the softening of Rome's position on Natural Law, especially as this has been utilized to reinforce a view of family limitation which Protestant bodies, recognizing the realities of today's world, regard as untenable. It is too early to project the outcome of the present papal commission's study of this problem. Perhaps Protestants should not press Rome too hard at this point. At the present moment, it seems clear that as the general public conscience is becoming the conscience of many Catholic married couples, some churchmen are quietly permitting their communicants to make use of the anovulant steroids (The Pill) for the ostensible purpose of gaining certain collateral therapeutic benefits, and with contraception as an incidental concomitant.

Among the more popular measures being taken to eliminate barriers between herself and other churches may be mentioned the Roman Church's exhortation to Catholics to accept change (often called "renewal") gracefully. More specifically they are exhorted to drop from their speech, and if possible from their thinking, the view that Protestants are "wrong" and to be regarded as religiously suspect. Laymen are urged to accept the view that the "People of God" includes "more than that which exists within the strict organizational limits of the Catholic Church." Others may lack the fullness of truth, but Protestant believers are now said to "belong to Christ."

Catholics are also urged to welcome the desire for unity within Protestantism. Protestants are praised for the work of such organizations as the American Bible Society and the Wycliffe Translators. Laymen are thus exhorted to regard Scripture as a meeting ground for unity, and Christian baptism as a bond between the Catholic and his "fullness of sacraments" and the Protestant who lacks this fullness.

Finally, Catholics of all walks of life are being urged to make friendly and courteous contacts with their Protestant neighbors. Common worship, though limited, is no longer forbidden, while common courtesy and respect for the convictions of others are urgently enjoined. Laymen are reminded that while direct evangelization can be resisted, few can resist kindness and love. Expressions of these are regarded as being compatible with a proper firmness on essentials.

III

Realism indicates that both Catholics and Protestants give recognition to elements which persist as barriers to the reunion of Christendom. Some of these seem to be regarded by the Roman

Hierarchy as negotiable. Among these may be mentioned the following: clerical celibacy, dietary and fasting customs, linguistic usages in worship and (possibly) Mariology.

While the question of an unmarried clergy was earlier pronounced by Pope Paul to be unsuitable for discussion, the fact remains that it is being discussed in many circles. Parish weeklies seem to suggest a softening toward the practice of Eastern Churches with respect to a married clergy. Some even make a point of saying that the Church has upon occasion ordained as priests men who were already married—this in distinction to permitting ordained priests to marry. Certainly this issue would be prominent should a reunion of Rome with non-Roman bodies be undertaken with seriousness.

Parish periodicals discuss freely nowadays the "positive" nature of legislation at the point of Friday-abstinence and fasting during Lent. It is stressed that such legislation has always been relative to such empirical conditions as prevailing availability of foods and the need for meat in the diets of those performing heavy manual labor.

The matter of the permission for the recitation of the mass in the vernacular is scarcely a source of controversy now. Only the conservatism of regional dioceses operates to compel the use of Latin. With regard to Mariology, it may be noted that stress upon more pronounced forms of the apotheosis of Mary has been muted since the passing of Pope Pius XII. Popular discussions within Catholic circles stress Protestantism's historic regard for Mary as implicit in their creeds, and note that the major issue is that of whether Mary's ministry ended at the Resurrection (or at the time of her death), or whether she should be regarded as having a continuing task in the Church. Laterally, Catholic writers view with favor the increasing stress upon tradition as *one* of the sources of religious truth upon the part of liberal Protestants as allies at this point.

There remain irreducible obstacles to a reunion of Christendom. Among those regarded as incapable of negotiation, three in particular may be mentioned: the sacramental system, the primacy of the Bishop of Rome, and the primacy of historic doctrine. The sacramental system, including the "seven sacraments," is regarded as a *pleroma*. Any dilution of this system, whether arithmetic or qualitative, may be expected to meet with concerted and permanent resistance.

The primacy of the Roman Pontiff has in no sense been abjured or modified. Realism demands a recognition that nothing has occurred to date to suggest that the Pope will ever sit, as one among equals, with Bishops (or Archbishops), be they Byzantine or Protestant. The Catholic Church, it seems, can only fulfill her mandate as Roman; while Catholic thinkers rejoice at the trend within Protes-

tant ecumenism toward a universally accepted episcopacy, they cannot surrender their own particularity in this respect.

Finally, the Catholic Church takes doctrine seriously. Historic creeds plus tradition are regarded as constituting a propositional whole, final and definitive in form. This writer has been impressed by the manner in which Catholic thinkers are baffled by the "faith last" stance of some Protestant bodies. They seem to perceive the imprudence of an organizational union in which diverse bodies meet by agreement on orders, polity, worship and sacraments, delaying until later to see in what respects they may agree in doctrine.

Conclusion

The foregoing considerations serve more to prompt questions than to suggest conclusions. In what sense, one may ask, has the Roman Catholic Church made the Protestant Reformation redundant, its issues no longer relevant? Is such a plea as that by Carl E. Braaten, published in the June issue of *Una Sancta*, for a return to Rome on the ground that the Reformation "sees its franchise as limited, provisional and terminal, and always related to the Roman Catholic Church," to be regarded as valid? Has Rome resolved the root-issues which seemed clearly to exist between the Church in 1517 and New Testament Christianity?

The writer recently visited two churches in Nürnberg, Germany, the first being the Church of St. Martha, in which the open Bible dominated the sanctuary, which was eloquent in its dignity and simplicity. Less than a hundred yards away was the Church of St. Klara, whose formal altar was flanked by a grotto-and-crucifix and a larger-than-lifesize statue of Virgin and Child. Does this contrast convince us of a completed, and therefore fulfilled Reformation?