

I BELIEVE IN ONE CHURCH

By BERNARD LEEMING

WHEN I SAY that I believe in the one, holy and apostolic Church, this means that I make in the strict sense an act of faith. My act of faith is free, reasonable, absolutely certain, and finally, the object of it is obscure. 'We see now in a mirror dimly, but then face to face'.¹ It is by faith that we believe in mysteries. Now a mystery is not, as the small child said, something which you know is not true but you believe it anyhow. A mystery means this: that we understand two terms of an affirmation, but that we cannot understand how they can be reconciled. For instance, we say that Christ is both true God and true man. We understand, of course, that God is omnipotent, eternal and all knowing, all loving, all holy. We know that man lives in time, indeed lives for a short time, is ignorant, sinful and passes away so very quickly. How then is it possible for this eternal God to be a real man living in time and subject to death? We cannot understand this, but we accept the fact upon the word of God himself and because of the teaching of the Church.

There are other mysteries of faith: the mystery of the blessed eucharist – how the bread and wine are changed into the body and blood of Christ. There is the mystery of christian marriage which reflects that other mystery of the union of Christ and the Church. In this sense, then, a mystery is something which we accept upon the Word of God, often through the Church, even though the 'howness' of it remains obscure.

But the word mystery is used in another sense, the sense of a great spiritual reality, present, but partly hidden and partly made manifest. In this sense Christ himself is said to be a mystery: as a man he was visible and could hear and see and could speak; but in him dwelt all the fulness of the Godhead.² This was not manifest and visible; it became believable through Christ's own witness of truth, and through his glorious deeds, especially his death and his resurrection. In the Dogmatic Constitution on the Church, the first thing that is said about the Church is that she is a mystery in both senses

¹ 1 Cor 13, 12.

² Cf Col 1, 19.

of the word. The Church is a mystery foreshadowed in the Old Testament; indeed she is said to have begun with Abel, who was her first martyr. The Church was foreshadowed in the covenant made by God with Abraham by which he was to become the father of many nations. But above all she was foreshadowed in the release of the jews by Moses from the slavery which they had endured under the egyptians. Moses led them out from slavery into the freedom of the promised land. And this is a foreshadowing of the freedom which Christ brings to all men in the Church from the slavery of sin and death into the new life of holiness and of grace.¹

The Council gives no definition of the Church. It is practically impossible to define the Church, just as it is impossible to define any of the mysteries of the faith. But the Church is described in the New Testament by many metaphors and comparisons. The Church is a sheepfold, and Christ is the good shepherd who gives his life for his sheep. The Church is like a land to be cultivated. It is like a seed that is down in the ground. It is like a vineyard with God the Father its owner, and Christ the vine itself onto which the members of the Church must be grafted. The Church is like the rock-foundation of a building which can withstand the winds and the storms. The Church is like a city built upon a hill; it is indeed the new Jerusalem, the city of God, the foreshadowing of that heavenly Jerusalem which will last for ever after this life is over. More intimately, the Church is called the very spouse of Christ: he loved her and delivered himself up for her to make her holy and worthy of himself.²

St Paul's figure is of the Church as the body of Christ. Through baptism we are formed in the likeness of Christ: 'For in one spirit we were all baptized into one body'.³ In the sacrament of baptism, a union with Christ's death and resurrection is at once symbolized and achieved: 'For we were buried with him by means of baptism into death. And if we have been united with him in a death like his, we shall certainly be united with him in a resurrection like his'.⁴ In receiving the body of the Lord, in the breaking of the eucharistic bread, we are taken up into communion with him and with one another: 'Because the bread is one, we, though many, are one body, all of us who partake of the one bread'.⁵ In this way all of us are made members of his body,⁶ and severally members one of another.⁷

This figure of the body of Christ is particularly appropriate

¹ Cf *Lumen Gentium*, 4.

⁴ Rom 6, 4-6.

⁷ Rom 12, 5.

² Eph 5, 27; cf *Lumen Gentium*, 6.

⁵ 1 Cor 10, 17.

⁹ 1 Cor 12, 13.

⁶ Cf 1 Cor 12, 27.

because the body is a living, growing thing, not a dead letter, not a code of laws. The body is constituted of different organs; yet all are united through the one animating soul. The Church, then, is visible, growing, made up of different organisms, but united through the spirit of Christ. So the Church, as Christ's body, must share his sufferings and humiliations – even his death, in order to rise again with him.

So, as the Council has declared, the visible society and the mystical body of Christ, the visible community and the spiritual community, are not two separate realities. 'Rather they form one interlocked reality which is comprised of a divine and a human element'.¹

Yet this image of the Church as a body has its limitations. One cannot begin to ask, for example, what parts of the Church correspond to the different parts of the body; though, of course, it is clear that the head of the Church is Christ himself. Recently, Orthodox theologians have been explaining what they call a eucharistic ecclesiology: wherever the eucharist is celebrated, there is the whole body of Christ. This indeed seems to correspond to St Paul's concept that the body of Christ, being one, is the same wherever the eucharist is rightly celebrated. Each local church is in a true sense the whole Church, just as Christ is whole in every eucharist; thus eucharist, bishop and Church are inseparably linked. The idea that the Church consists of several parts is not essential to the concept of the mystical body; for, as in the eucharist, there is the whole Christ and not merely a part of him, so in each local church there is the whole Church and not a mere part of it.

Similarly, synods and councils are not gatherings of parts of the Church, or of representatives of different parts of the Church: they are witnesses to the common faith of all. A common administrative unity, that is one body which represents the whole and can make decisions for the whole, is doubtless an exceedingly useful, and possibly even a necessary, element in the Church. Nevertheless, the Church cannot be conceived as though it were like a civil government, with its power of making laws, of administering them and of judging disputes among the various members. Such a concept is inadequate to that mysterious reality which is the Church. The Roman Catholic Church has accepted this in as much as it regards the bishops, not as representative of their part of the Church, but rather as witnesses to the belief of the Church in their region. It is

¹ *Lumen Gentium*, 8.

the same with the successor of St Peter. Similarly, the World Council of Churches has never accepted the principle that a majority vote must prevail. This is particularly evident in the attitude taken by the World Council towards the Orthodox Church; although the Orthodox churches may be numerically small, nevertheless their witness and their outlook upon christianity has never been regarded as a matter which might be voted down by a majority of the churches within the World Council.

In short, the comparison of the Church of Christ to a body should not be pressed too far. This is shown by the very careful affirmation which reads as follows:

This Church constituted and organized in the world as a society, subsists in the Catholic Church which is governed by the successor of Peter and by the bishops in union with that successor, although many elements of sanctification and of truth can be found outside her visible structure. These elements, however, as gifts properly belonging to the Church of Christ, possess an inner dynamism towards Catholic unity.¹

As Cardinal Bea frequently said: 'In virtue of baptism every baptised person becomes a member of the mystical body of Christ, a brother of Christ and hence our brother also'.² The second Vatican Council reaffirmed this teaching. Speaking of those who do not profess the faith in its entirety or do not preserve unity of communion with the successor of Peter, the Constitution on the Church says, 'They are consecrated by baptism, through which they are united with Christ'.³

The decree on Ecumenism states:

By the sacrament of baptism, whenever it is properly conferred in the way the Lord determined, and received with the appropriate dispositions of soul, a man becomes truly incorporated into the crucified and glorified Christ and is reborn to a sharing of the divine life, as the apostle says: 'for you were buried together with him in baptism and in him also rose again through faith in the working of God who raised him from the dead' (Col 2, 12; cf Rom 6, 4).⁴

This, however, refers to individuals, for it is individuals who are baptized. But the elements of the true Church which exist outside

¹ *Lumen Gentium*, 8.

² Cf Rom 12, 4 ff; 1 Cor 12; Eph 1, 23; 4, 4; 5, 28 ff; Col 1, 18-24.

³ *Lumen Gentium*, 15.

⁴ *Unitatis Redintegratio*, 22.

the visible concrete roman catholic Church are not purely individual matters; they are endowments given to these churches and ecclesial bodies in their corporate capacity. Consequently, the members of these churches and ecclesial communities receive not only baptism by virtue of their membership but also many of the real gifts which the Church of Christ possesses. The original text of the Constitution on the Church had declared that the mystical body of Christ is the catholic Church. This however raised doubts in the minds of several Fathers, notably Cardinal Lercaro; doubts resolved by replacing the word 'is' by the word 'subsist', which means 'to exist in', 'to have one's reality in'. Cardinal Jaeger explains it thus: 'The Church and the mystical body are one and the same, but the Church as a visible society is coextensive only with its historical dimension, while the mystical body is coextensive with the workings of Christ's grace, and this is part of the mystery'.

Some of our christian brethren have taken mild offence at the use of the expression 'ecclesial communities'. Behind this terminology, however, lay an important element of theology. An anglican observer, Professor Howard E. Root, in his most perceptive and lively commentary on the Decree on Ecumenism, says: 'In the 1963 text the title had been: Christians separated from the Catholic Church'. The earlier roman catholic habit had been to speak of other christians simply as individual baptized people, giving no serious recognition to their claim to be, not just individuals, but members of churches, or indeed members of the Church. The original title then of this third chapter of the Decree seemed to perpetuate this habitual usage. It was a point which disquieted the observers seriously, for implicit in the usage they saw a denial of any truly 'church' character or status to their own communions (a denial, which, to many, was itself implicit in the roman claim to be the one and only 'Church'). As the debates progressed, it was clear that not a few of the Fathers were themselves aware of this anxiety and sensitivity and wished to see a change in the formula. The result is the title as it now reads: 'Churches and Ecclesial Communities separated from the Roman Apostolic See'. The wording of the title and of the chapter itself leaves it an open question as to which western communions should be called 'churches'. This is perfectly reasonable, because there are western communities like the Quakers who do not choose to call themselves a church.¹

¹ Pawley, Bernard C., (ed.), *The Second Vatican Council, Studies by eight Anglican Observers*

The Catholic Church, like the Orthodox Church, does claim that the mystical body of Christ exists in her; but this does not mean that the Church has reached perfection or that it has the fulness of the unity which Christ willed. Speaking of ecumenical work by catholics, the decree says:

Their primary duty is to make a careful and honest appraisal of whatever needs to be done or renewed in the Catholic household itself, in order that its life may bear witness more clearly and faithfully to the teachings and institutions which have come down to it from Christ through the hands of the apostles.

For although the Catholic Church has been endowed with all the divinely revealed truths and with all means of grace, yet its members fail to live by them with all the fervour that they should; so that the radiance of the Church's image is dimmed in the eyes of our separated brethren and of the world at large, and the growth of God's kingdom is delayed. . . . Catholics must gladly acknowledge and esteem the truly christian endowments from our common heritage which are to be found among our separated brethren.¹

'Nevertheless', the decree adds, 'the divisions among christians prevent the Church from attaining the fulness of catholicity proper to her, in those of her sons who, although attached to her by baptism, are yet separated from full communion with her. Furthermore, the Church herself finds it more difficult to express in actual life her full catholicity in all its bearings'.²

No doubt many, in describing the roman catholic Church, would begin with the primacy of the pope, with the bishops, the priests, the mass and the sacraments. The Constitution on the Church, however, does not do this. In its second chapter it declares that the Church is the people of God. It is not primarily an institution, it is primarily *people*; the pope, bishops, priests, religious and the laity, all of them are united and all of them are equal 'as a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a purchased people . . . you who in times past were not a people but now are the people of God'.³ The Church, then, is not merely a body of doctrine, although she must have a clear doctrine; nor does the Church consist merely of

(London, 1967), p 136. These studies by anglicans are the best that I have seen; and Professor Root's comments upon the decree on ecumenism is a delight to read.

¹ *Unitatis Redintegratio*, 4.

² *Ibid.*

³ 1 Pet 2, 9-10.

the pope, the bishops and priests, as unhappily so often in the past it has been imagined. The Church is not primarily an organization and an institution, but the people of God, men, women, children; popes, bishops, priests, religious, are all equally members of God's faithful, equally in need of God's forgiveness, and the guidance of the holy Spirit.¹

Through the sacramental life, especially the eucharist, the people of God imitate Christ in his sacrificial life. The sacrifice of the mass is not the priest's sacrifice nor the bishop's sacrifice, but the sacrifice of Christ, made actual and living in the sacrificial offering of the whole people of God, each and everyone called to be united to Christ in his self-giving to the Father, in his offering of himself for his brethren.

But the new people of God is also called to imitate Christ in his prophetic office. Here the Council makes a bold, even an astonishing statement:

The body of the faithful as a whole, anointed as they are by the holy One (cf Jn 2, 20-27), cannot err in matters of belief. Thanks to a supernatural sense of the faith which characterizes the people as a whole, it manifests this unerring quality when 'from the bishops down to the last member of the laity', it shows universal agreement in matters of faith and morals.²

This prophetic office of the whole people of God was made a reality when, for instance, the popes asked what was the existing belief about the immaculate conception, or about the assumption. It was particularly manifest between the years 325 and 381 A.D., when unhappily the majority of the bishops, who were appointed by the civil power, fell away from the faith in Council after Council, whereas the body of the faithful under the leadership of saints like St Athanasius, St Hilary and St Ambrose clung tenaciously to the truth that Christ is truly the Son of God, of the same essence and substance as the Father.

Similarly the history of the Church shows that, at times, large numbers of the faithful may be led away into error – for example, the monophysites and donatists of earlier centuries, and more recently the jansenists, and the gallicans who held that no decree from Rome had any validity, unless it was accepted by the Church of France.

¹ Cf *Lumen Gentium*, 9.

² *Ibid.*, 12.

At Vatican Council II the concept of collegiality was elaborated: the pope and the bishops together sum up the witness of the whole people of God and declare it without mistake. The full implications of this doctrine were not, of course, fully worked out; one practical implication is the meeting of the synod of bishops. In this sense the second Vatican Council was a beginning and not an end. Indeed, through its treatment of the people of God as a pilgrim people, it made clear that there is never any absolute finality in the insights which the Church may gain of God's designs for it. The word finality should not be misunderstood. What the Church declares and finds is, of course, absolutely and not merely relatively true; but the door is always open for the Church to understand more fully and more deeply the designs of God.

Even now on this earth the Church is marked with a genuine though imperfect holiness . . . But we have not yet appeared with Christ in the state of glory (cf Col 3, 4), in which we shall be like to God, since we shall see him as he is (cf 1 Jn 3, 2). Therefore, while we are in the body, we are exiled from the Lord (2 Cor 5, 6), and having the first fruits of the Spirit we groan within ourselves (cf Rom 8, 23), and desire to be with Christ (cf Phil 1, 23).¹

In the decree on ecumenism, at least three times the people of God are declared to be pilgrims and wayfarers, who gradually come to understand more of the mystery of the Church.

In the dogmatic constitution on divine revelation, this growth in understanding of the mystery of the Church is very explicitly affirmed:

This tradition which comes from the apostles develops in the Church with the help of the holy Spirit. For there is a growth in the understanding of the realities and the words which have been handed down . . . As the centuries succeed one another, the Church constantly moves forward towards the fulness of divine truth until the words of God reach their complete fulfilment in her.²

The one very definite manifestation of this growth in understanding is shown by the relation of the Catholic Church to the World Council of Churches. This development is from a coldness and even disapproval to gradual understanding, cordial approval and co-op-

¹ *Ibid.*, 48.

² *Dei Verbum*, 8.

eration, together with, on the part of certain representative catholics, a desire that the Catholic Church should join the World Council of Churches.

In 1927, roman catholics were forbidden to attend the Lausanne Conference on Faith and Order; and after that conference, in 1928, Pope Pius XI issued his famous encyclical *Mortalium Animos*. This encyclical, entitled 'Fostering true religious unity', is certainly harsh in some of its expressions, and less acceptable in its uncompromising assertions that the only true unity must consist in a return 'of all christians to the roman catholic Church'. At the same time, this encyclical must be judged, not only by the existing condition and relationship of christians to one another, but also by the statement made by the Orthodox churches in the Lausanne Conference itself, that they could not accept reports on a basis of compromise between conflicting ideas and meanings.

If one compares the full statement by the Orthodox with the declaration of Pius XI, it is evident that the Pope had before him the Orthodox statement.¹

One may think today that Pius XI was unnecessarily unsympathetic and even harsh; and certainly christians outside the catholic Church experienced a sense of disappointment, even of bitterness. However, Bishop Stephen Neill, certainly an expert upon the ecumenical movement, writes as follows on the matter:

In making this declaration, the roman Church has rendered a real service to the ecumenical movement. The perpetual danger of such a movement is that it may sink down into acceptance of a woolly-minded friendliness as its goal. The roman catholic Church reminds it that what matters is the *truth*. Charity and fellowship are needed, but they are needed as conditions for an effective search after truth.²

Ten years later, at the 1937 Conference of Faith and Order in Edinburgh, there were present five roman catholic observers, though of quite an unofficial kind.³ In that same year, Fr M. J. Congar wrote and published his book on *Divided Christendom: principles of a*

¹ Cf Bate, H.N., (ed.), *Faith and Order: Proceedings of the World Conference, Lausanne, August 9-31, 1927* (New York, 1928) pp 382-386. The encyclical of Pius XI was translated and printed in the work edited by Sir James Marchant, *The Reunion of Christendom* (London, 1928), and then by the Catholic Truth Society, London.

² Neill, Stephen, *Men of Unity* (London, 1960), ch 13, p 173.

³ Fr Maurice Bevenot, S.J., who was one of these observers, gave a most sympathetic account of this conference in three articles in *The Tablet* (London, Aug 7, 14, 21, 1937).

Catholic ecumenism. Though Fr Congar was critical especially of the Life and Work movement, nevertheless he pointed out that as the movement was developing, it was freeing itself from many of the mistakes present in its origins, and admitted that in consequence 'it is not impossible that a measure of Catholic participation may be given to some parts of the ecumenical movement'.

This gradual, and often painful, growth in understanding is particularly reflected in the statement issued at Toronto in 1950 by the central committee of the World Council of Churches. It was made clear that no church compromised its principles by membership in the World Council and that member churches need not regard other members 'as churches in the true and full sense of the word'. In 1951, the World Council's theological commission made the same declaration, even more explicitly and strongly.¹

Meantime, catholic involvement in the ecumenical movement steadily increased. At the meeting of the Faith and Order Commission and of the Central Committee at St Andrews in 1960, there were four roman catholic observers, approved but not officially nominated. At the general assembly of the world Council of Churches at New Delhi in 1961 there were five roman catholic observers officially nominated; and there were observers at the second Vatican Council appointed by the officials of the World Council of Churches. The Secretariate for Promoting Christian Unity, set up by Pope John, under the presidency of the late and very much lamented Cardinal Bea, not only welcomed these observers from the World Council and from other world denominational bodies, but treated them with the utmost confidence, so that, as many of them have said, they felt that they themselves were involved in the work of the Council. The same indeed was true of the fourth world Conference of Faith and Order at Montreal in 1963, at which at least sixteen roman catholics, either official observers or officially invited guests, were present.

At the fourth Assembly of the World Council of Churches at Uppsala in July 1968, apart from official observers and guests, there were approximately one hundred and fifty roman catholics present. Two roman catholics gave addresses to the whole assembly, Fr Robert Tucci, S. J. and Lady Jackson (Barbara Ward). Fr Tucci raised the question as to whether or not the catholic – should I say

¹ The Toronto statement is published in Bell, G. K. A., (ed.), *Documents on Christian Unity* (London, 1968), Vol IV. The report of the theological commission is printed in a small but very precious booklet *The Church*, ed. R. Newton Flew (London, 1951).

the roman catholic – Church should apply for membership in the World Council of Churches. Behind this suggestion lay the deliberations between representatives of the catholic Church and of the World Council in what was called a joint working group. The second report of this group, in 1967, expressed the view 'that for the moment the common cause of christian unity would not be furthered if the roman catholic Church were to join the World Council of Churches'. Fr Tucci indicated that in his view this should not be regarded as a final solution, and the weight of his address was rather to favour it. Whatever be the result of the deliberations which are at present in process as regards the entry of the catholic Church into the World Council, one thing impresses me greatly: the patience and forbearance of the members of the World Council of Churches, especially its leaders, and very especially of Dr W. A. Visser t'Hooft, in the face of repeated rebuffs, of misunderstanding of their aims and their principles. In spite of the conviction of many members of the World Council that the roman catholic Church should in principle be opposed as having distorted or corrupted the christian message, they remain serene and open 'to all those who profess Jesus Christ as God and saviour, and therefore endeavour to follow their common calling to the glory of the one God, Father, Son and holy Spirit'. Their patience and sagacity may well be a lesson to all of us catholics.

Lack of space has prevented our giving more than the briefest outline of the development which has been taking place in the catholic Church. If one asks: 'What will the Church be like in the next fifty years?', no man can give an absolute and definite answer. This question was repeatedly urged upon the World Council of Churches; and in 1961 the Faith and Order department gave an answer about the nature of the unity which is essential to Christ's Church:

We believe that the unity which is both God's will and his gift to his Church is being made visible as all in each place who are baptized into Jesus Christ and confess him as Lord and saviour are brought by the holy Spirit into one fully committed fellowship, holding the one apostolic faith, preaching the one gospel, breaking the one bread, joining in common prayer, and having a corporate life reaching out in witness and service to all and who at the same time are united with the whole christian fellowship in all places and all ages

in such wise that ministry and members are accepted by all, and that all can act and speak together as occasion required for the tasks to which God calls his people.

It is for such unity that we believe we must pray and work. This brief description of our objective leaves many questions unanswered. We are not yet of a common mind on the interpretation and the means of achieving the goal we have described. We are clear that unity does not imply simple uniformity of organization, rite or expression. We all confess that sinful self-will operates to keep us separated and that in our human ignorance we cannot discern clearly the lines of God's design for the future. But it is our firm hope that through the Holy Spirit God's will as it is witnessed to in holy scripture will be more and more disclosed to us and in us. The achievement of unity will involve nothing less than a death and rebirth of many forms of church life as we have known them. We believe that nothing less costly can finally suffice.¹

The condition of christianity in the world today does not permit division of christian effort and of christian prayer. Professor Skydsgaard put it like this: "The colossal technological development which inescapably stamps the mentality of men, the increasing spread of atheism, the dynamic expansion and power of the great world religions, the explosive awakening of the non-european peoples and their struggle for freedom and equality, and not least the threatening indifferentism, indeed the apostasy of great masses in older christianity, all this is a tremendous challenge to the christianity of today".²

But more than this, there is need of christian unity to work against the possibility of war, to work against racialism, poverty, and the secular relativism which is invading the world.

¹ Visser t'Hooft, W. A. (ed.), *The New Delhi Report: The Third Assembly of the World Council of Churches 1961* (London, 1962), pp 116-117.

² Cited in Leeming, B., *The Churches and the Church* (2nd ed. London, 1963), p 185.