THEOLOGICAL TRENDS

INTERCOMMUNION III

Unity in Faith

AS WAS NOTED at the very beginning of this series of articles on intercommunion,[1] the historic reason why christian communities have broken ecclesial, and therefore eucharistic, communion with each other has from the beginning been that some thought others to have strayed from the faith; and if the error is thought to be one about the Eucharist itself, that causes particular difficulties about shared eucharistic worship. So this final article will consider more deeply the question of unity in faith.

The question

But how do we understand faith, and so unity in faith? What not long ago would have seemed a simple question with a clear answer has in recent theology come to be seen as an extremely complex one. And that for a variety of reasons.

It has become a commonplace in theology to regard a 'propositional' view of faith as belonging to a past age. Since Vatican II's Constitution on Divine Revelation, it has been commonly, one might even say universally, accepted that our faith is *in Christ*, not in statements about God, however important or authoritative these may be. Faith is a personal encounter, a recognition, a personal relationship to God as he communicates himself in Christ — as he communicates *himself*, not just information about himself. Faith is not ultimately in any verbal expressions or formulations of this encounter, however sacred or reliable: scripture, or revered traditional teachings, or formal conciliar and papal pronouncements. The teaching of the Church is not itself the object of our faith. God in Christ is.

A very summary scheme may provide a helpful framework in which to consider our problem. *Revelation* is an act of God communicating himself — that is, expressing himself through media that are available to man's grasp, and at the same time giving himself to man through these media in a personal relationship. *Faith* is man's grasp of God so communicating himself. But no revelation has in fact taken place until it has been grasped by man and responded to. So, no revelation without faith. And one slides into the other, so that, in concrete experience as opposed to formal thought, we cannot draw

[1] Cf *The Way*, vol 18 (October 1978), pp 300ff.

some sort of line between God's act of self-gift and faith as our God-given response. But faith, man's grasp of God communicating himself, does not exist in a 'pure' state, in no way articulated or formulated by man in images or ideas. So faith slides into *beliefs*, and once more there is no clear line of demarcation between them. A man can only imagine or conceptualize the God he grasps, first to himself and then to others, in the images and thought-patterns available to him through his experience and culture. Beliefs are historically and culturally conditioned. Even within a general cultural pattern, one can see the difference between the beliefs of Paul, John, Mark, Matthew, Luke, and so on. But they are more like each other than any of them could possibly be like Confucius, or Copernicus, or Bertrand Russell. Beliefs, or theologies, are very varied in the early christian communities: they form a series of checks and balances and are not a system. Some beliefs may become the accepted formulations or expressions of a community, and can therefore be called *doctrines* (what is taught). If doctrines arise in a widespread community which appear to conflict with each other, the community may seek for the means (by majority vote or official action) to canonize and define one particular doctrine or formulation, and thus produce a dogma (decree).

Up to and past Vatican I, the Catholic Church hardly realized that christian doctrine had developed and been systematized within a rather narrow western thought-world which played on the various themes generated by a greek-based culture. There was some recognition that the Eastern Churches had their own, somewhat different, approaches; but there had been no real cultural exchange for centuries, and the Eastern Churches had not experienced the developments in systematic theology of the latin west. The conviction grew in the Catholic Church that there could be evolved a timeless, trans-cultural, philosophical language in which the truths of the faith and the teaching of the Church could be ever more perfectly expressed.

This is a question to which we shall shortly return. But at this point we must turn back and ask: What is unity in faith? One can only get at a man's faith (in a sense he can only get at it himself) through the forms of expression he gives it. Yet the forms, beliefs, are not themselves either his underlying believing or *what* he believes, what he grasps. They are the mediations through which he grasps God — in the case of christian faith, God communicating himself in Christ. If unity in faith could be simply equated, as in a propositional view of faith, with unison in beliefs, the question would have a clear and simple answer. But as it no longer can, we are left with the problem: How do A and B know when they are united in christian faith and when they are not? What are the criteria?

From personal christian experience, and from christian tradition, all would surely accept that *one* criterion is orthodoxy, the holding of right or acceptable beliefs. But orthodoxy has come to look a great deal less simple than it did when we lived within an enclosed western culture, which was regarded as

culture or civilization *tout court*, and when inflated views of the timelessness of this culture's abstract language were pervasive.

Orthodoxy

Perhaps the first thing to recognize about human formulations of christian faith is that they are all extremely limited in the face of the divine mystery they are trying to express; they will necessarily leave room for alternative formulations, illuminating different aspects of the same mystery. From the nature of its task, systematic theology has tried to sharpen up intellectual tools for approximately adequate expression of God's self-gift in Christ, within a shared and recognized conceptual world. It needs to do so for teaching purposes within that cultural world. In the process, theology has given way to the besetting western temptation of over-intellectualism: it has tended to set aside the non-conceptual forms of human expression as rather second-rate, and even irrelevant, forgetting that poetic, imaginative, and also non-verbal forms of expression are in some ways more adequate than refined intellectual and abstract tools to express the love story of God's and man's gift and response. The conceptual forms of expression can only be an attempt to crystallize in abstract terms the whole range of vivid and concrete ways in which and through which man develops and formulates his grasp of God: dancing, the graphic arts, sculpture, architecture, music, silence — in a word, the liturgy in its broadest sense and scope; but beyond that, wordless silence, inexpressible feelings, human rapport, care for the needy, forgiveness, love of the enemy, the experience of the mystics, and so on.

Even if one narrows orthodoxy down to chiselled verbal formulations, to truths, one comes up against the perennial problem of 'the hierarchy of truths'. This phrase of Vatican II is generally understood to mean, not that some truths (human apprehensions of God and their verbal expression as beliefs) are more true than others, but that some are more central and others more peripheral. But this is a spectrum, in which one truth bases and slides into another (for example, all christology is soteriology): there is no possible way in which one could draw a line and say where 'essential' truths end and 'inessential' truths begin. If the mysterious change in the eucharistic elements is a less central truth than the doctrine of the Trinity, yet there remains a mutual interaction between the two: the doctrine of mysterious change is not simply added to a right-and-tight corpus of doctrine, but each conditions the other. (How, in this instance, do we understand the reality and action of God's Spirit in the whole dispensation of creation and salvation?) Yet it is clear that it is in the more central truths that Christians are united, and that they are divided over the more peripheral.

A further problem for orthodoxy arises today from the admitted fact of pluralism. The discovery or rediscovery of non-western cultures within the Church has made us realize that all forms of human expression are historically and culturally conditioned. Within the western world itself, it is recognized

that diverse thought-patterns all have their own validity (philosophical pluralism), throwing light on reality and human experience from different angles. No one now advocates *the* exclusively true and comprehensive system. Philosophers puzzle over how one approach or system is to be related to another. Within theological tradition, the differences between east and west are no more than variations within a common heritage. Beyond them lie semitic cultures, african and asian cultures, which have, or will soon find, their own forms of expression of revelation. The problem of relating them to each other is sometimes posed as if it were simply about translating from one verbal language into another. But this is a secondary and derivative level. Underlying it is the diversity of actual human experience at different ages of history and in different parts of the world. Men and women have variously experienced the world and human life, and hence their expressions of their experience are infinitely diversified. Eastern and western Christians have experienced their Christianity differently because they have experienced it in different 'worlds'. Even in very similar worlds, Catholics and Protestants have experienced their Christianity differently. What is meant by unity or disunity *in faith*, if it is the one God who calls all to himself in the one Christ, precisely where they actually are in the history and geography of mankind?

Within the Catholic tradition there is a characteristic experience of Christianity which many books have endeavoured to portray. Within this 'ethos', certain beliefs have developed into accepted doctrines, and some of them have been given formal definition as dogmas. When the current theology of faith was content to rest at the level of authoritative statements, and did not delve beneath to the reality of faith in Christ, it could easily be affirmed that dogmas such as those concerning the infallibility of Church and Pope, the Immaculate Conception and Assumption of Our Lady, were themselves the direct or immediate object of our faith. And that, no doubt, is how the vast majority of Catholics today have been taught to think. But if faith is always and only in Christ, if only God in Christ can engage 'the obedience of faith', then truths such as those indicated, however true, cannot themselves directly engage faith. So, in the hierarchy of truths, not only does one move out from the centre into areas that are more peripheral, but not all christian truths can be put on an equal level or footing as 'truths of faith'. If the central truths unite and the peripheral divide, one must assert that the existing unity in faith is of far greater weight and importance than the division.

A further consideration is that, if disunity in faith is a barrier to eucharistic sharing, we must be careful not to demand far more of other Christians when using the criterion of orthodoxy than we demand of our fellow Catholics. (And this needs thinking about, quite apart from the known tendency in ecumenical relations to compare the worst of 'them' with the best of 'us'.) Most Catholics are baptized in infancy. The only creed they affirm is the liturgical creed we say together during Mass. And this we say to God, not to each other. We do not present our fellow Catholics with a long list of the

Church's teachings for their assent, before we are prepared to receive Holy Communion together with them. Of course, we are brought up together in the same Church: we can rightly assume that we shared and accepted the same instruction in the meaning of our faith before we were admitted to First Communion. However, the level of teaching in childhood we enjoy today is far higher than in former ages of the Church; and, surely, a large number of adults who go regularly to Mass and Communion would fare badly if catechized about their faith. But does anyone think this presents any barrier to our eucharistic sharing? Holy Communion is not just for the better educated — who, incidentally, are in recent years showing quite a new diversity in their theological opinions. Of course, we would say, all these share the same faith with us: we share 'the faith' precisely because we belong together in the one Church and go to Mass together; because the actual celebration of the liturgy is a concrete experience and expression of sharing the same faith. Hence the paradox or circle: if you are in the same Church, you will assume you share the same faith, because you concretely live it together, unless there is inescapable evidence to the contrary. If you are in different Churches, you will assume you do not share the same faith, unless enormously complicated processes of discussion and agreement are worked through — or, of course, unless you actually get to know one another.

A further problem is posed, akin to some of those we have been considering, by the very development of doctrine itself. Doctrine develops because christian experience develops, because the Church is in the world and in history, moving always onwards into new ways of experiencing human life, and accumulating an ever growing store of rich reflection on all that experience. If Acts 2 is to be taken literally, Peter on the day of Pentecost proclaimed the Gospel in one 'sermon' and 'those who received his word were baptized, and there were added that day about three thousand souls'. In his letter to the Romans (10, 9), Paul wrote: 'If you confess with your lips that Jesus is Lord and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved'. (This is one of the texts which strongly suggest that the earliest christian creed was 'Jesus is Lord': and, of course, if you understand its meaning, it says a great deal.) Is what is necessary and sufficient for salvation not sufficient for eucharistic sharing? Was it not sufficient for Paul's converts to celebrate the Eucharist together, and *thereby* grow in their grasp of God's revelation in Christ? The development of the rich variety of christian tradition, in art, liturgy, doctrine, spirituality, is a progressive unfolding of 'the inexhaustible riches of Christ'; it is a witness to the creative and transforming power of God at work in his Church. Yet the limitation of man's created historical condition and of his ability to respond to God's self-gift is such that growth and variety have always been a source of alienation, fears, misunderstanding, rejection. Surely today, when we have a better understanding of the whole process of human growth and of christian growth, we are called on to fashion unity in and out of diversity itself?

Orthopraxy

A doctrinal criterion for whether we and they share the same faith, however difficult, has generally been thought to be necessary. In Catholic tradition it may be regarded as sufficient; but it should not be. Some recent writing has shown that up to and including the Council of Trent, *fides* was a wider concept than it later became. It then included 'morals' or christian conduct (and *mores* was used by Trent to refer to customary practices). It was nearer to the idea of 'the faith', which we were just considering as a shared christian life. Counter-Reformation theology restricted the meaning to assent by the mind to revealed truths, leaving the rest to 'charity' (with some neglect of hope).

Some Christians today have gone to the opposite extreme, perhaps with understandable fretfulness about the intricacies of theological debate (especially over such matters as ministry), and the sense that theological discussion endlessly spins out christian differences instead of healing them. Over against orthodoxy they set the claims of 'orthopraxy'.

In a more popular form, the protest can come from inter-denominational groups of Christians, possibly though not necessarily young ones, who work together for the poor and the otherwise deprived, or who are trying to tackle the injustices of the national or international social order. This, they will protest, is what the Gospel is all about. This is Christianity. Christ divided the sheep from the goats by the test of practical concern for those in need: he did not set them a test of right conceptual thinking. We who are living Christ's command to the best of our ability *are* united in faith. The Church is called to be one, not for its own comfort (indeed, our divisions left undisturbed have proved very comfortable), but to do the truth in charity. Unity is not only *for* mission: it exists only *in* mission.

The same challenge can take more theoretical forms, and from different origins. An actualist ecclesiology[2] is more prevalent in the Free Churches than in the national or established ones. It has a different idea of the Church as a more selected, participating, committed body. As a criterion for eucharistic sharing it is at least as much concerned with good christian living as it is with credal affirmation. It asserts that the table is the Lord's, not ours, and that we have no right to exclude any who believe in him; the life of Jesus shows that he welcomed them. At least this ecclesiological stance starts from the end of orthopraxy; but many doctrinal emphases and insistences characteristic of evangelical Christianity may be assumed and included in what is recognized as good christian living. From quite a different source there has come in recent years the claim of 'liberation theology', that Christians should not first work out their beliefs and then put them into practice: it is only from his practical (and political) commitment that one can know what a man's beliefs are, indeed that he can discover them for himself; Christians should

[2] See the second article in this series: *The Way*, vol 19 (January 1979), pp 57ff.

engage themselves wholly in the struggle for justice, and work out their theology afterwards as a reflection on their concrete experience.

But perhaps it is only at a first or naïve level of awareness that orthopraxy can seem either a sufficient or a simple criterion of unity in faith. The moment one looks a bit further, the approach from orthopraxy becomes as complex and as divisive as that from orthodoxy. What are the right christian attitudes to war, to nuclear weapons, to the breakdown of marriage, to transplants, and so on? Christians can be at least as divided on these issues as on the traditional doctrinal ones; only, the divisions may well be across the denominations rather than between them. For our present purposes we need only note that Christians can be obviously sincere and committed believers in Christ, with a deep personal relation to him, yet differ very widely in their assessment of human conduct. And it is disturbingly inconsistent for Roman Catholics to assert that the Spirit of God dwells in and is the source of vigorous christian life in other communions, when they hardly seem to consider the views of such Christians as even relevant to the discussion of moral values. Catholics are also often unaware that they are regarded as having low standards in some moral matters (drink, betting, freedom, intellectual integrity, for example.) An eschatological view of the Church, which saw it as ever striving to *become* the true Church of Christ, would be more aware of its need for help.

One must certainly also include within the concept of orthopraxy — indeed it could have been put first — the sharing of prayer and worship among Christians. Catholics married to members of other Churches may be the most eloquent witnesses here, as their involvement is life-long and has often developed more deeply. Another tradition of worship is at first strange, but it becomes more familiar, and one comes to appreciate one's own tradition more fully in relating it to another. There is much to learn as well as much to give. When this is set within and motivated by the need to grow in mutual understanding that is the very texture of conjugal love, a very deep experience of actual unity in faith can develop. Even at a much less committed level of personal involvement one can, by repeatedly sharing with other Christians in prayer, grow in awareness that we are already deeply united in faith with each other; repeated presence at their Eucharist may well lead to a personally acquired, and therefore not publicly available, conviction that we mean the same thing by the Eucharist, that we are united in eucharistic faith. As with the recognition of ministries, conviction of unity in faith can grow from below out of concrete and personal involvement; and even from out of theological dialogue, when one has progressively got to know 'the others' over repeated occasions, even if the 'agreed statements' do not come too easily.

Catholicity

We were probably brought up to think of catholicity in terms of a single expression of christian faith (in word and worship), accepted and lived

uniformly across the world (a point of view that always overlooked the Eastern Catholic Churches). We were probably brought up to think that the (Catholic) Church simply *is* catholic. But the recognition of legitimate pluralism opens up a new vision of catholicity as the embracing in unity — by mutual acceptance, by sharing in worship and in christian mission — of many diverse christian life styles and emphases. It is a vision of a rich, even inexhaustible, catholicity. And an understanding of the Church as growing into all truth, growing into the mind of Christ, growing into the fulness of humanity (of the New Man, Christ), rather than possessing any of these qualities in any absolute or ultimate sense, leads to the idea of catholicity as a goal that lies ahead, a goal that can only be perfectly fulfilled in the Kingdom, when Christ is both all and in all.

The tensions we have considered between the claims of orthodoxy and orthopraxy, similarly, point to an idea of unity in faith that is something to be struggled for and progressively achieved. They point to tensions that need to be lived creatively, in hope and in humility, rather than to be resolved by over easy methods that would opt for less than the fulness of unity in faith. They suggest that the Church, wherever it now is in history, is always called by God to create, in response to his challenge and the driving force of his grace, a new sort of unity in 'the faith' such as has not existed before, rather than to look back at past forms of unity — past forms which we tend to romanticize.

The tensions can be very difficult to live. It is so much easier to know exactly where we are: to have a clear 'package' of doctrine to repeat, to preach to the world, and to pass on; to have clear and authoritatively defined rules of conduct to live by. The Law, however exacting, is easier than a Gospel which never allows us to settle down, to be in possession, to arrive, but always impels us forward in promise and in hope.

The whole problem is to decide what are the limits to legitimate pluralism in orthodoxy and in orthopraxy; what are the boundaries within which unity in faith can be creatively sustained, and beyond which it cannot really be experienced as existing. There is no theoretical answer to this question. But it is clear enough that the tighter the boundaries are drawn, the more will people be excluded who claim to follow Christ. The history of doctrinal definition in the Church, progressively excluding greater and greater masses of believing Christians, should be a warning against drawing them too tight. A similar warning should come, too, from our increased understanding of the relativity of human cultures and of the processes of human growth. We are born into a group; we need to share characteristics with a group in order to have any at all; we need to belong to a group to develop our personality; we grow as persons by deepening and widening our personal and social relationships. The Kingdom of God stands over against us in our growth, and breaks open all our tribalisms, all our ways of being human and of being Christian; it draws us unresting towards its own fulness.

In laying down a simple trinitarian basis for its association, the World Council of Churches already excluded many who claim to follow Christ, but who do not confess the Trinity, or who perhaps (like the Quakers) have no credal confession at all. But it included the main christian traditions, not with the idea that confession of the Trinity was sufficient, but in order to create credible conditions in which unity in 'the faith' could grow. The Roman Catholic Church, with its developed doctrinal tradition, remains outside this Council and most of the equivalent national Councils, though the Orthodox Churches found it possible to join. Certainly, the Roman Catholic Church is greater in size, by far, than all the WCC membership put together. The question it must face is whether it can better serve Christ's call to unity from outside or from inside the structures into which others put their commitment. Here the question is only stated: it is far too complex to treat, and no position is being advocated. But it does seem to emerge from the various considerations we have explored that, neither theoretically and theologically nor practically and realistically, can the terms of unity in the faith simply be dictated by the Roman Catholic Church.

Growing into unity

Our reflections seem to have strayed far from intercommunion, and the subject has hardly been mentioned in this article. This is because 'unity in faith', 'the dangers of indifferentism', and 'the authoritative teaching of the Church' are symbols that register so strongly in the Catholic tradition. In a nutshell, our reflections have tried to show that the great Catholic tradition needs a good deal more flexibility, needs to learn to live with some uncertainties, and would be the more catholic, the more true to itself, for doing so. And it could then be more accepting of other Christians.

There is a tragic irony in the whole matter of unity in faith, which we touched on when reflecting on the presumption of unity in faith that exists among fellow Catholics. There is a gap to be jumped. The work of International Commissions (RC-Anglican, RC-Lutheran, etc.) is important in its patient task of dialogue and the hammering out of agreed statements. This work can prepare the ground, it can take all reasonable and prudent measures, it can ensure as far as possible that a future unity will be viable. But you cannot ensure that you are united in faith as a necessary preliminary to uniting. This is the lesson of all the union schemes, both those that have failed and those that have succeeded. Unity in faith is deeper and wider than all possible preparations for unity. It is something you can only live. You can only have 'unity in the faith' when you are united, when you live the christian life together in shared worship, in shared reflection, in shared mission to the world. Even within a single Church, the Catholic or any other, unity in faith is something to be constructed, to be lived, to be aimed at, to be achieved. So there comes a point, from our present position of divisions, when the preparations are played out and begin to look like stalling, and the

gap has to be jumped, the challenge to be met. It is not a matter of papering over cracks but of jumping ravines. Ravines do not go all the way down.

Could one point once more to the inter-church marriage as offering a paradigm? In their case love comes first, with many preliminary interchanges; marriage follows closely; and unity in life and in christian faith is thereafter progressively achieved: by mutual exchange of the riches of each tradition, by shared prayer and worship, by the joint mission of bringing up children to know a unity that holds diversity together.

And so to our subject, intercommunion. We are no longer beginners in the modern search for christian unity. We have taken our bearings, we have weighed our responsibilities. Christ instituted the Eucharist to express the unity which already deeply exists among us, the unity which he gives and which all human limitations and infidelities can never destroy. He instituted the Eucharist to be the sacrament of the unity of the Church: that is, to express the imperfect unity we have and to transform it into the unity of the Kingdom. Are there any substantial grounds, as between Churches or individuals seriously committed to creating the unity towards which he summons us, for holding back from using the chief means to unity he has given us, the embodiment of his one Body? In the Catholic tradition, with the Eucharist so central to our ecclesiology, our ethos, our life, there will be great sensitivity to eucharistic sharing as involving our whole identity. Yet in contemplating a marriage you have to pledge your identity to another in trust and in purposive hope founded on love.

The last Downside Symposium at Bristol in 1972, which examined the question of unity in faith carefully and from many angles, came to the conclusion that the liturgical creed should be taken as a sufficient basis not only for intercommunion but for full communion.[3] Granted that a formal relationship of intercommunion between Churches is something of an anomaly, as being indistinguishable from full communion, yet the lesser anomaly should be accepted in order to overcome the greater, the division of the Churches. There should be a period of 'pragmatic intercommunion' on the basis of our common Creed, which is the basis of full communion within each Church. This would create the climate and the conditions in which the Churches could grow into full communion and full co-operation in mission; it would enable the Churches to construct unity in the faith.

John Coventry S.J.

[3] Its papers are published in *Church Memberships and Intercommunion*, ed J. Kent and R. Murray (London, 1973).