

Ecumenical Thoughts

Rev. Dr. G. Panicker

The aim of the ecumenical movement can be described as the setting up of perfect ecclesiastical union between Non-Catholic Churches and communities and the Catholic Church, as the gathering of all Christians to the unity of the one and only Church. The union of the Churches should not be thought of in terms of an 'ecumenism of return' i.e. the return of other churches to the Catholic Church in its present form. The concept of a return would not do justice to the fact that non-Catholic Christians, already belong to the people of God, and that in their communities the Church of Christ is already present in various ways. The Catholic Church itself should undergo a change of form in many respects, in the Spirit of the Gospel. But what its future concrete form will be, when it has carried out the reform of itself which has only just begun, it is not yet possible to tell at present even though Catholic faith is certain that this form should always be characterized by the ministry of the successors of the Apostles and the Petrine office.

The union of Churches should be thought of in terms of the principle of unity established by Jesus Christ. The unity which Christ bestowed upon his Church is not lost from every Church, but "dwells" in the Catholic Church and by God's grace is something she can never lose. The Catholic Church owes it to other Churches to make this confession of faith, according to which a unity bestowed by Christ is realized in itself, at least with regard to the essentials of this unity. But this unity is not perfectly realized in all its aspects. This unity can grow even within the Catholic Church; the perfection of its unity is an eschatological entity. Each Church — that means also the Catholic Church —, through a communion in a charity centred on Jesus Christ and in obedience to His will, must be ready either to welcome what it lacks, so that the fullness of the gifts of salvation may shine forth in it, or to rectify anything which causes an imbalance of evangelical values in its life. A purely voluntarist "union" of Churches based solely on the re-establishment of charity,

would just be lopsided. There is no question of creating a unity by mutual agreement among Churches; it is a question of discovering the unity of the Church, which essentially subsists in the Catholic Church.

The anomaly of the united Church versus sister Churches or the so-called ambiguity of uniatism should not be exaggerated in such a way as to prevent or exclude the reception of individual non-Catholic Christians into the Catholic Church or to consider the united Churches as a barrier between the Catholic Church and other Churches. The Catholic Eastern Churches are not substitutes for the separated Eastern Churches; they are some sort of bridge Churches to help the separated Churches to discover the unity they seek, and these Churches can merge into the corresponding Eastern Churches in case these Eastern Churches become part of the one Church of Christ. The unity of the Church is a mystery and the union of Churches can be achieved only by a special grace of God. Humanly speaking, in the context of existing conflicts and complexities within each of the separated Churches and in the complex social and legal situation prevailing in these Churches, it is practically impossible to achieve the union of these Churches into One Church. Even if the majority in these Churches agree for such a union, there will be a few who

claim to be the legitimate heirs of the Churches in question, and these would continue to exist at least legally though perhaps reduced to a minority. It would be foolish therefore not to recognize, accept, encourage or foster the ecclesial tradition and liturgy of the group that wants to unite with the Catholic Church. What should rightly be rejected is the cheap proselytizing propaganda among the believers of another community. We should never forget that the grace of God is at work not only in the ecumenical movement, but also where the 'conversion' of the individual non-Catholic Christians or of a group of non-Catholic Christians to the Catholic Unity takes place for reasons of conscience or even of mental peace and social convenience. Certainly such conversions from one Church to another raise their own problems and form a burden in the relationship between the Churches. But this has to be borne as part of the suffering caused by the divisions in the Church founded by Jesus Christ, and should prompt the other members of the Churches to seek and find the unity of the Church. There is no other way of solving the so called "theological problem" of the United Churches versus the sister Churches. Whether the establishment of the united Churches (or uniate churches) was good or bad for the cause of ecumenical

union can remain only a theoretical question for academic and arm chair critics. These Churches do exist and are even fairly successful. If they have not yet fulfilled all the expectations centred upon them, is it not because the powers that be in the Church did not always help them to remain faithful to their vocation? As the late Patriarch Maximos IV Sayegh has said: "The Eastern Catholic Churches represent a powerful and indispensable means for the establishment of Christian unity, but only if they maintain, and are helped to maintain a two-fold and equal loyalty toward Catholicism and the East. If they are wanting in either regard, they can only harm the cause of unification".¹

What happens often is that the Eastern Churches are strangled, or just tolerated. They are not allowed to grow, or expand and as a result their ecclesial reality is weakened, and eventually assimilated into the predominant Latin Ecclesial and liturgical outlook. This is what has happened to the Syro-Malabar Church and this is what is slowly happening to the Syro-Malankara Catholic Church. When this happens as a result of prolonged

and continuous moral and social compulsions, is it not cruel and inconsiderate to say that "as things stand today there is little difference, apart from the liturgical rite, between the Syro-Malabar, the Syro-Malankara and the Latin Churches"?²

Those who uphold the need of double jurisdiction in the Eastern rite dioceses, and deny the need in the Latin dioceses seem, in practice if not in theory, to consider the Catholic Church as Latin, and not as a communion of Churches. Unless and until this attitude changes, the Oriental Catholic Churches will rightly feel that they are treated with condescension as a kind of racial throwback, or as closed communities, incapable of further growth and condemned to stagnate as a historical relic. Catholics of the Eastern rite must either be worthy of their mission or disappear. They cannot remain indifferent or unmoved when confronted with the problem that provides them with the very reason for their existence as a Church. Within a Catholicity that is largely Latin, they have to remain Eastern, and within an Eastern Christianity that is predominantly non-Catholic, they have to remain Catholic.³

1. Maximos IV Sayegh (ed.), *The Eastern Churches and Catholic Unity* (Herder), p. 47.

2. "The St. Thomas Christians", *The Examiner*, September 20, 1980 (Bombay).

3. Cfr. Maximos IV Sayegh, *op. cit.* p. 18.