

# Comment

## *Commitment to Ecumenism*

Thirty years ago, ecumenism suddenly became respectable. Ordinary Catholics began to take part in united services, common bible study, and so forth, with considerable enthusiasm. More recently, however, people have lost interest. Many of the greatest admirers of the present Pope are among those who seem most content to see the decline of ecumenism. But in 'Ut Unum Sint', his recent encyclical letter on 'commitment to ecumenism' (25 May 1995), Pope John Paul II repeats the call for Christian unity made by the Council — when 'the Catholic Church committed herself *irrevocably* to following the path of the ecumenical venture'. Invoking Pope John XXIII, and citing liberally from Vatican II texts, he invites us to engage in prayer and dialogue to bring about unity among Christians.

'The ecumenical movement really began within the Churches and Ecclesial Communities of the Reform', the Pope says, sounding a little surprised (the Edinburgh Missionary Conference of 1910!)—but, as he points out, the Patriarch of Constantinople issued an appeal for Christian unity at about the same time. He does not mention the dreary list of papal condemnations of the ecumenical movement (from 'Mortalium Animos' onwards)—it took forty years for a successor of Peter, whose ministry is 'the visible sign and guarantor of unity', to place such trust in this 'movement, fostered by the grace of the Holy Spirit, for the restoration of unity among all Christians'. The Pope views with satisfaction the 'already vast network of ecumenical cooperation' and notes that much is being accomplished 'thanks to the influence of the World Council of Churches' (of which he is apparently less critical than many of its admirers).

Clearly, however, it is the Orthodox who matter in the Pope's ecumenical vision. He even seems to hope for reunion by the millennium. But, with only five more years to go, great obstacles remain. While Catholics in the west no doubt have friendly feelings towards the Orthodox, one can only be shocked at the scurrilous anti-Catholic pamphlets on sale in monastery bookshops in Greece, for example. There is still much popular hatred of the papacy. Even at the level of rational discussion, however, the obstacles perceived by the Orthodox are much greater than the Pope's letter seems to allow. He celebrates the fact that he has been able to sign agreed statements of faith with the patriarchs of churches that rejected the dogmatic formulations of the

Councils of Ephesus (431) and Chalcedon (451)—which of course does not mean that eucharistic communion has yet been restored. But, while noting the progress of Catholic/Orthodox discussions, he is not able to mention any specific achievement. He is silent about the doctrine of the Trinity, for example, where Orthodox still regard Catholics as deeply in error (the 'filioque' and all that). He insists on the right of the Eastern Catholic Churches to have their own identity and to carry out their own apostolate, as well as to take part in ecumenical dialogue, but he obviously knows that 'the Uniate problem', much exacerbated by disputes over Church property in former Communist states, remains hopelessly insoluble for the foreseeable future.

What the Catholic Church has to contribute most specifically, in the Pope's view, to the restoration of full communion among Christians, is the papal office itself, as a ministry of unity—'Do not many of those involved in ecumenism today feel a need for such a ministry?' the Pope asks. But, as he knows, this ministry of unity is the greatest obstacle in the perception of most other Christians, 'whose memory is marked by certain painful recollections'. To the extent that he is responsible for these, the Pope joins his predecessor Pope Paul VI in his appeal for forgiveness (at Geneva in 1984) for past abuses of the papal ministry. The Pope invites us to engage with him in 'a patient and fraternal dialogue' to 'find a way' for him 'of exercising the primacy' in the 'new situation' where the majority of the churches have 'ecumenical aspirations'.

Deeper involvement with the Orthodox Church would, of course, make the admission of women in the Catholic Church to the ranks of the clergy even more unlikely. For most ordinary Catholics in the west at least, a more pressing problem is the fate of the divorced and remarried person in the eucharistic community. Here, quoting as its authority the text of Matthew 19:9 —'If a man divorces his wife, for any cause other than unchastity, and marries another, he commits adultery'—the Orthodox Church permits both divorce (interpreting unchastity quite widely) and the remarriage of divorced people (in a low-key ceremony). Of course, marriage is a bond that is in principle lifelong and indissoluble, and the breakdown of marriage is an evil. But when a marriage has irretrievably collapsed, the Orthodox Church is prepared to let people have a second chance. If Rome is prepared to return to full eucharistic communion with the Orthodox Church, there will have to be some modification of the papal style of government—but there will also have to be a different attitude to the problem of the divorced and remarried Catholic. Perhaps that only shows how distant reunion is.

F.K.