



Monasticism & Prayer for Unity

If ecumenism has reached an impasse and successive Weeks of Prayer for Unity come and go without any real impact, then something needs to be done about it. Genuine and deeply committed prayer must increase.

It is hardly possible to do this to order, however, since the sort of prayer we are speaking of is a vocation, a call from God needing firstly to be perceived and then responded to with generosity. But though it cannot be the calling of the majority, nevertheless each of us can pray the Lord of the harvest to send forth this particular kind of labourer into his harvest. Likewise we can all keep the ears of our hearts open just in case the call should be addressed to us.

What is asked is the total gift of self - a concept every Christian is aware of since this is what our baptismal consecration and discipleship implies. Yet it is something we can all find a thousand different ways of evading. Sometimes, though, there is a radical inconsistency - all or nothing.

Traditionally, what is technically known as the Religious Life has provided the setting for such a vocation to be tested and lived out. Religious Life has had a variety of expressions, from the life of hermits in the desert through to organised communities of monks and nuns, Franciscan and Dominican preaching friars, missionary brothers and sisters, apostolic religious working among the poor, the sick, in education . . . and so on. Beneath the differences, however, is an underlying unity. All are called to a life totally consecrated to God and normally under vows; the worship of God, prayer and loving service are of prime importance.

The emphases, though, are slightly different in the various forms that have grown up. In monasticism, for instance, there is a particular stress on the corporate daily round of prayer and praise in the set Offices of the Church, together with a strong community life under an Abbot or Abbess. A vow of stability binds the monk or nun to the community of their profession, and hence to their brothers or sisters, for life. For these and other reasons it has often been in the monastic communities that specific vocations to prayer for unity have risen and flourished.

Moreover in recent years, the Roman Catholic Church has officially encouraged *Benedictine* monasteries and convents in their work and prayer for unity. It would seem that the Rule which St Benedict wrote for his monks in early 6th century Italy, and which is normative still in the Western Church, is particularly relevant to ecumenical spirituality and endeavour. Indeed the influence of the Rule has not been confined to the Roman Catholic Church since there are also Benedictine communities in the Anglican and Reformed Churches. These, too, have been drawn to pray and work for unity. Also

the Rule itself draws considerably on the earlier traditions of the Desert Fathers and the Rule of St Basil, and is thus closely linked with Eastern Orthodox monasticism.

There is, then, a mini ecumenical movement between monks and nuns across denominational barriers. They have a shared way of life and ethos which goes back far behind the major divisions of Eastern and Western Christendom and those of the Reformation era. The monastic way *is* itself a life of prayer, and a life which unifies, both on the personal and corporate levels. It is fertile ground for ecumenism and for this alone deserves to be fostered and encouraged in our time.

The call to life-long commitment in the monastic way remains open then. But it is also possible to share in and learn about monasticism and then seek to live out the ideal where we are, as far as circumstances allow us, in our ordinary daily life. There could still be an equally valid call to live and pray for Unity in such a situation. Abbé Paul Couturier, the great apostle of Christian Unity and architect of the Week of Prayer as we know it today, was called to precisely this vocation as a Benedictine Oblate. He would be the first to encourage us to discover, as he did, what it means to let the prayer of Jesus for the Unity of his Church have free course in our hearts and lives. The impact on the ecumenical movement could be immeasurable.