

The Great Flood of Prayer

Abbé Paul Couturier 2

The ecumenical movement *is* prayer - the yearning of humankind to find wholeness again, together, in God, at the other side of sin and brokenness. The Church knows herself to have sinned, by aggravating instead of healing that brokenness, and seeks to atone, to begin again and truly be a sacrament of unity in the world.

Abbé Paul Couturier, French Roman Catholic priest (1881-1953), was given to experience acutely the pain and scandal of Christian disunity. In consequence, he dedicated himself to the work of ecumenism and became a tireless instrument in God's hands, a veritable prophet and apostle for the cause of Christian Unity, rooted and grounded in prayer. His prophetic insights still speak resoundingly to us today. Much of what he foretold has begun to take place. There is much to hope for.

Prayer has first place, Christ's prayer on the eve of his passion (John 17), and *our* prayer in and with his as his followers. As early as 1944, in his Tract, for the January Week of Prayer Couturier was saying:

The prayer of Christ and the spirit of this prayer ought to animate, quicken and possess the soul of any Christian who approaches his Saviour . . . If every Thursday evening, the night of Holy Thursday, an ever-increasing multitude of Christians of every confession would form as it were an immense net embracing the earth like a vast invisible monastery, in which all should be absorbed in prayer to Christ for Unity, would we not have here the dawn of Christian Unity?

The idea did take off and people in various parts of the world did pray in this way each Thursday. Some still do. Maybe even more could begin to do so? Such prayer is more vital than ever in our time, since there have been setbacks as well as advances in the succeeding years and we dare not rest on our laurels. Penitence for shortcoming was actually a point frequently stressed by Abbé Paul. In his *Ecumenical Testament*, for example, he says:

... we all bear a terrible burden of guilt in this drama of separation. If this guilt were only guilt of omission, indifference, unconcern, or readiness to accept the present state of affairs, it would be terrible enough; but how much spiritual pride has shown itself, and still shows itself on all sides, strengthening the barriers and deepening the ditches? Let each of us examine himself before God.

Then, courageously, for the time when he was writing, Couturier speaks of his own church:

Because the Catholic affirms the unique nature of the Catholic Church as an integral part of his faith, he must be the first to set an example of deep humility ... an habitual expression of his sorrow for broken Christianity - a sorrow which persists as a token of true regret and contrition for the faults of his ancestors ... and remembering also his own faults.

Surely the Abbé's heart would warm towards a Pope John Paul II and his invitation to his cardinals and bishops to join him in apologising to fellow Christians for the sins of the Catholic Church against them in the past!

In other ways too Paul Couturier's heartfelt desires have been realised in the intervening years. 1937 saw him in England making contact with Anglicans. Père Maurice Villain, his biographer and disciple, reports that the Abbé was present at an address given by the then Archbishop of Canterbury and wrote afterwards with great emotion to an Anglican priest friend:

O, if only the day would come when a message from the Archbishop of Canterbury and one coming at the same time from the successor of Peter should resound throughout the world calling vast numbers of Anglicans and Catholics to prayer, for Christian Unity to be officially and solemnly brought about once more!

What joy he would have experienced at the several meetings in latter years between Popes and Archbishops of Canterbury and perhaps especially that in 1982 in Canterbury itself between Pope John Paul II and Archbishop Robert Runcie - their shared prayer, joint statement and commitment to work for unity.

Père Villain also shares some of the Abbé's intimate prayers with us. They have not gone unanswered. In relation to the attitude of his own Roman Catholic Church to the Scriptures, he prayed sincerely and succinctly:

(Lord Jesus Christ) . . . grant that Holy Scripture, alongside the most holy sacrifice of the Mass, might become the daily food of the faithful and of priests.

And again, this time in reference to the Holy Spirit:

Lord Jesus, may your Church become prophetic, may the Holy Spirit be known, preached, loved, prayed to, truly adored as a Person, and may Catholics live fervently under his influence.

Pope John XXIII's 'New Pentecost' at the time of the Second Vatican Council and, not least, the Charismatic Movement in the Catholic Church as elsewhere, are eloquent testimonies to answered prayer.

Similarly the Abbé grieved over the stance of his church concerning 'mixed marriages' (where only one partner was a Roman Catholic). There is still a long way to go here but considerable changes have taken place. The Association of Inter-Church Families (and related groups) are proof of this. Abbé Couturier is again direct and simple in his prayer:

Lord, I pray you, change the legislation of the Church concerning mixed marriages and those of different rites. May people no longer be faced with having to make heroic renunciations as a way through [May the Holy Spirit be allowed free course, he continues]. Lord, have pity on your Church! Lord, have pity on those who have fallen because of this modern legislation!

By extension, can we hear the Abbé praying for the plight of the divorced and remarried deprived of Holy Communion? We can certainly perceive his ongoing prayer for the current setbacks in Catholic/Orthodox relations since in his lifetime such things were already dear to his heart:

Lord Jesus Christ . . . I pray as well, with my whole heart, for mutual understanding between Catholics and Orthodox.

But back now for a few minutes to Couturier's *Ecumenical Testament* and to some of his more directly prophetic insights. He was astute enough to see that great changes lay ahead for the Roman Catholic Church, indeed for **the** Church as a whole. These things have gained momentum since his day and it is hard for us to keep pace:

The day will come when the peoples of India, China and even Africa, will face the reality and implications of the message of Christ: then within the Church there will be throngs of Asiatics

and Africans, rivalling the peoples of the Old World and the New in numbers, influence and sanctity; many things in the Catholic Church will be changed, but nothing essential. The same Creed will be stated in different ways, wide horizons of Scriptural study will be revealed; new forms of spirituality will make their appearance . . . organization and discipline will be modified.

There can be no doubt at all that all these things are underway and, despite the confusion and consequent trepidation, we need not fear. The essentials **will** remain since the Church is not ours but Christ's. If that were not so nothing would matter anyway since everything would then be delusion!

If we are to weave our way through confusion, and hold on to the essentials of the faith, then this is a work for **all** Christians since all are involved, not simply Roman Catholics. Even in his time Couturier was feeling towards the need for a great world-gathering of Christians. Vatican Council II was a half answer to this prayer since non-Catholic observers were present, but more than ever since then the need for a truly **ECUMENICAL** Council has been mooted, something other than the World Council or a Pan-Orthodox or Lambeth Conference.

One day, but not even yet, Couturier would seem to be saying. The separate Church groupings have first to get their own houses in order:

reform themselves in whatever respect reformation is needed, and [then] mounting towards our Lord, [they] will reach the height where the walls of separation end . . . then dogmatic Unity will be realised, when the spirits of all are united in the unique Thought of Christ; and union will be proclaimed by the voice of Peter. [Will all Christians one day be able to accept the universal primacy of a reformed papacy?] This will perhaps take place in a great Ecumenical Council.

There is, then, a long way to go. Moreover there is a parallel work under-way. From his earliest years the Abbé had been aware not only of the Church and Christianity but of other world religions too. Prayer for Unity could not be restricted to Christian Unity - inevitably it must be all-embracing, joining the 'great flood of prayer' rising from the hidden depths of the whole of humanity. It is to this broader ecumenism that we turn now.

Even in his 1939 Tract, for the Week of Prayer, Paul Couturier, near the start of things, could say:

It is clear that the unity desired by Christ is an organic unity such as will grasp and gather into his heart the soul of mankind in its entirety.

A little later in the text, he remarks: 'But that is the end and not the beginning.' All the same, it is an end we are not free to forget.

The way into this cosmic unity, as Couturier saw, was through shared baptism. Christians were already united by this means, despite denominational divisions, but even non-believers were to be included. Catholic teaching already allowed for a 'baptism of desire'. Membership of the body of Christ (cf 1 Corinthians 12) was open to all such:

Since all who are baptised, either by water or desire - a great multitude, both of professing Christians and of pagans, seekers of the unknown God through what is positive in their dim beliefs and strange rituals, true Christians, though they did not know it - since all the baptised have in them the Life of Christ, they must be described in the light of the wonderful relationship which Paul describes in I Corinthians 12. (Ecumenical Testament)

We can excuse the seeming condescension of 'dim beliefs and strange rituals' and recognise instead the Abbé's nascent prophetic awareness of the working of God within **all** the World Religions. It is a short step for him to recognise next that the prayers and aspirations of **all** seekers after truth flow into the wave of prayer for Christian Unity. It is all one:

Let every Christian be aware of this great flood of prayer, which drives into his own heart to find utterance of that 'yes' which will let it unfurl like a breaking wave before the very throne of the Divine Majesty. By this 'yes' . . . I imprint with the seal of my own personal life this flood which has come from the most distant depth of the heart of the human race . . . (Ibid)

These are obviously the words of contemplative experience and were written later on in the Abbé's life. Preparation for his vocation is evident from his earliest years all the same. The fact that there was Jewish blood in his family background was significant, and then, most of his childhood, from the age of three until he was twelve, was spent in Algeria. He would be no stranger to Islam. His friendship later on with Abbé Jules Monchanin was important in this last respect as well as introducing him to Hinduism.

The influence of this wider ecumenism was first expressed by the Abbé in the context of the Week of Prayer in 1936. By 1946 a second list of intentions for the week included *prayer for the sanctification of Jews; of all non-Christians and the unity of all men in the charity and truth of Christ.*

There were those who disagreed with such an approach but the Abbé could not go back on his vision. After all Jewish, Moslem and Hindu friends would be reading the tracts and needed to know the all-inclusive love of Christ. And finally, it was discovered after his death that the bourse used by Paul Couturier when celebrating Mass was full of memorials including the Jewish people, Islam, India, his agnostic and communist friends, as well as Christians of all the churches and the offering of his life.

The final words perhaps sum everything up - the sacrificial gift of self to Christ so that his will for the unity of all may have free course in us. That is what prayer for unity meant for Abbé Paul Couturier and for the countless other souls he was in contact with, throughout the world and the Churches (and beyond). This was the 'Invisible Monastery' he spoke of whose members still pray as he did. We will close by letting the Abbé's words speak for themselves:

Prayer is the fundamental force. It is fundamental because it is the greatest of cosmic forces. . . It is man's prayer in Christ, or Christ's prayer in man (which is the same thing), which upholds creation in its due order, gives it harmony, makes it pleasing to God, and make creation sing . . . the perpetual praise of thanksgiving to the Creator.

Since God has made us members of Christ, he has given us a power which is dreadful and terrible, but of indescribable sweetness . . .

By creating in the soul a condition of the will, prayer causes us to introduce into the universe a metaphysical force with strength proportionate to the strength, calmness and stability of that will.

Such is the power of the offered life and such prayer is meant for all. May we not fail in our trust:

O Word of God, become Christ, we are all, everyone advancing towards the Truth which is yourself, for ever pursued, as we all are, by your love, by your Spirit. We set out upon this journey, always without ceasing. We never arrive . . . He is the Way by which we go, the Truth to which we make our way, on and on . . . the Life in which we dwell here below, through the darkness of faith, despite our sin . . . later in the 'Father's bosom', the home where there is no more sin, and where the spirit walks, or rather runs from glory to glory. (Ibid)

It is towards that goal that we are all travelling and there we will all one day meet, when the great flood of prayer from the whole human race will have been gloriously fulfilled.