

The Patient Preparation of the Spirit

Abbé Paul Couturier

'The vision awaits its time - it will not lie. If it seem slow, wait for it', so the Lord spoke to the prophet Habakkuk (Chap 2 v3), adding by way of encouragement, *'it will surely come, it will not delay'*. It is indeed well for us to remember that God's ways are not our ways and a thousand years, in **his** sight are but as yesterday come and gone.

Paul Couturier (1881-1953), pioneer and apostle of Christian Unity in his own, Roman Catholic, Church and far beyond, had to wait fifty years before his vocation matured and he could begin his life's work.

Fifty years after his death we ask ourselves how much nearer his great vision actually is to fulfilment? Such a question, humanly speaking, is unanswerable. The situation is profoundly complex and we can only sense ourselves to be immersed in a vast cosmic process of divine initiative, nothing less than the undoing of sin and the reunification of all within the eternal purpose of God. The stoppings and starts of a mere fifty years, though the progress **has** been real and evident, cannot be seen from **our** standing-ground in their full significance. But we do have faith and if needs be will go on waiting. What, then, was the Abbé's initial vision, the End which he perceived at the beginning, and how has it been working out? We look to his *Ecumenical Testament* (final version 1952-3) for pointers.

Even back in the nineteen-thirties Paul Couturier recognised that God was not calling everyone to submit to a monochrome church. The various, separated confessions were rich in their diversity. Their individual treasures would one day have their place in the fully restored and corporately united Church of God's intending. It would not be a case of individuals converting to THE Church, slowly but surely, one by one, thus leaving their original church-grouping to eventually disappear. For some a change of allegiance might be within God's providence but it would not be normative. Reunion would instead be corporate - promulgated by Church leaders, yes, but above all desired and welcomed from below by all the faithful - eventually. The process would be long:

Like the great mountain roads which climb gently in wide curves, the high roads of corporate reunion develop in their long, slow progress the patient preparation of the spirit - that of the laity as well as that of the hierarchy.

If we sense that in fifty years we have not got very far we should remember that education takes a lifetime. The end **will** come:

Later, much later, will come a day, the day ordained by Providence, when corporate reunion will be achieved by the religious leaders, and when the faithful, their hearts now completely disposed towards

unity, will all, by their own respective adhesion, set the seal upon this Reunion, the common goal of their deepest desire. The works of God are accomplished slowly, and transcend, even while fulfilling the laws of our psychology.

Our leaders **have** tried and in many ways **have** grown closer together despite the setbacks now and then. Sometimes the laity have been streets ahead, wanting to call the tune, sometimes breaking rank. At other times and places there has been resistance and a digging in of traditionalist heels. Surely this is all part of the Abbé's envisioned slow process of growth. People inevitably learn at different rates with all that that implies in the way of friction along the way. If we want our riches to be preserved we have to allow others to have their differences acknowledged as well. **Our** church may in fact have something to learn from other believers. Couturier insists on that fact:

Each Christian group has its own particular religious riches, and these will be preserved when Christian Unity is restored within the Unity of the Church. This is a fact I would emphasise [and now, quoting from some words of Jean Guittou written in 1937] 'May there not be, among our separated brethren, traditional forms of expression, customs, or even doctrinal developments, which are not so easily perceived in the Mother Church?'

'Mother Church' was, understandably for the Abbé, the Roman Catholic Church, but, as we have noted, he frequently stresses that he is not advocating individual conversion, or 'submission', as at one time it was called. Couturier's attitude of tolerance here was actually the genius of his new approach to prayer for unity and the safeguard of his vision. Fullness could not be achieved by suppression:

If the impossible happened, and this kind of union [i.e. through individual conversions] were to succeed, it would be through gradual assimilation, progressively destroying rich differences of culture; whereas it is the vocation of all to form one single vast harmony, a symphony of different complementary but concordant strains. The creator has called all the riches of his creation to form a harmonious whole in Christ.

So too, the Abbé continues, individual believers have their own gifts and cultural inheritance to bring into the fullness of the Church and this joy should be allowed them. They must not be coerced to convert but rather, unless clearly directed by God, should remain as they are, in their own Church and contribute their unique gifts in this way:

Each and all should accept and value their present state, if they wish, as they should, to take their part in the thought of their Creator; otherwise how much poorer the Church of Christ would be in its effort to represent the Gospel message to the world!

This is a tremendously bold affirmation in its context. Few of us have yet learned such generosity. Despite co-operation at times in mission, across denominational boundaries, there are still in some areas of the world great fears of alleged proselytising whether real or apparent - much antagonism and

lack of genuine love between Christians. But here too progress is bound to be slow and irregular. Churches emerging from years of persecution and isolation will inevitably be on the defensive, and cannot be expected to put into practice immediately norms of ecumenical tolerance that are new to them and in a sense threatening.

We must ourselves, then, not look askance at others, or if spoken against answer back with bitterness. The patient preparation of our own and our antagonist's spirit is underway. Time and charity are required. This is gospel teaching and is what the Abbé wishes us to be about in the long waiting period. All of us, in our own churches and daily settings, should be seeking to grow in love and obedience, in true Christian holiness; then one day we shall meet in Christ. The Abbé coined phrases to describe this process. Instead of living in a spirit of acrid one-upmanship - I and my Church are better than yours - we should all be aiming at 'spiritual emulation', a friendly rivalry in **true** holiness, outdoing one another in love, and rejoicing in the truth when we find it in another. If this should become the genuine aim of all believers then we could speak of 'Parallelaboration', parallel lines of ever-increasing holiness rising from all the Churches and meeting, as one in Christ, in the heavenly realms. Our shrinking numbers need not daunt us here. Maybe we are being summoned as the remnant and little flock, to pursue our calling with a greater measure of single-mindedness than would otherwise be possible. See how Couturier spoke half a century and more ago:

From the complete separation of their different places of worship, the full independence of their beliefs, rites and types of spirituality, Christians separated from each other will utter from their hearts their prayer for unity, and will let Christ pray in them ... parallelaboration ... expresses very well the temper of the time now at hand when 'spiritual emulation' must be found among all Christians.

Even if things seem to have got muddled, and there have been more or less abortive attempts to unite the Churches, as it were politically, across the barriers; even if our Churches are at loggerheads within themselves and are changing in our life-time beyond all recognition, *parallelaboration* is still an option (probably vital) for us, whether individually or as a small grouping - fidelity in Christ's prayer that all may be one; fidelity in the pursuit of holiness (without which no-one shall see God).

It becomes increasingly clear, however, as we look back over Abbé Paul's writings, that not all the developments in ecumenism over latter years seem to have stemmed directly from his vision. Would he welcome them or see them as aberrations? Probably time alone can tell. What is of God will endure. How, as we have already hinted, would the Abbé view the merging of Churches, covenanting, shared worship when confessional differences are blurred? It is of interest to note what he has to say about interdenominational centres of worship, for example:

There must be no dream of building a place of worship in a town centre where everyone would come to pray together, deserting their places of worship.

He fears here for those he terms 'timid Catholics' who are devout and well-meaning but have no real concept of what Christian Unity involves, through no fault of their own. Might *they* become over-enthusiastic about such a project? Then, interestingly, he continues:

As a matter of fact this dream of thus building has obsessed the minds of a number of liberal Protestants, sometimes most courageous in spirit and noble in mind. They were never very numerous, and indeed where there has been a positive revival of Protestant theology, their number has become smaller and smaller. It may be said that the ecumenical movement has outgrown this pitfall.

Has it, we may ask, and is it a pitfall? What of shared churches, especially in sparsely populated areas? What of the renewed theological understanding of the local church, which implies the gathering together of **all** Christian believers in one locality? What, even, of the nature of ecumenical worship at World Council and more localised levels? Are we barking up the wrong tree or are they legitimate developments of the *parallelaboration* process? No doubt, once more, time alone can tell. All along the line we must use the litmus test of gospel integrity, of 'spiritual emulation'.

Most probably these latter things can be seen as legitimate outgrowths from the Abbé's counsel that separated Christians should meet up together, get to know each other. Where there is growing friendship and fellowship, sooner or later there comes an urgent desire for spiritual sharing. We battle still to know which barriers to full communion are truly insuperable. And surely spiritual sharing is far far better than the interdenominational bickering, even persecution unto death, of the past? Paul Couturier rejoiced that such internecine strife was rapidly becoming a thing of the past. There was to be no use of force or coercion in our work for Unity, no request for lightning or fire to come down from heaven to destroy our apparent enemies. We are not involved in a military operation:

..... to be described in military terms of conquest, victory, triumph, struggle, lines of defence, as though [we] were waging a war. Schism, persecution, tolerance, and indifference - all these are stages in the history of Christian Unity which are now in the past, in spite of some sad, but happily spasmodic modern persecutions among Christians; we are now in an age of mutual respect, of understanding, and of brotherhood founded on our basic unity

Are we, we might ask cynically, over half a century on? Have we not gone a goodly number of steps back in the area of mutual recrimination in some quarters, and is it *never* known for so-called Christians to maim, kill or persecute one another? There would seem to be something devilish in such retrograde behaviour, and the Abbé would no doubt agree. To curse our fellow believers in so-called prayer is of the evil one, he claimed. Forms of appeal to God such as the following must be banished for ever from the Christian heart:

Lord, may lightning strike those who do not hurry to rejoin us in our Faith, since they will not listen to us and be converted. Lord, already thy justice scatters them, ruin is upon their house Among the ruins of their own church they will at last come and join us, and Unity will have arrived.

The Abbé continues at once, saying:

Such prayer cannot be from above. It is Satan, or Satan's likeness in us, which inspires it. It is Satan alone who destroys This prayer is blasphemy against the work of God

Which work and where? Couturier quite openly asserts that he is condemning attitudes that had been so prevalent latterly in his own Church even up to his time: *'This prayer is blasphemy against the work of God among our non-Catholic brethren.'*

Few, mercifully, would still think in such a bigoted vein about their own church as alone possessing the truth, or at least not consciously so, but is such an attitude absolutely uprooted? The Abbé was a realist in his ecumenical understanding, and his insight into the subtleties of the powers of evil at work in the world enabled him to perceive that the way ahead would be thwarted at every turn. Did not scripture foretell that Satan would increasingly have his field day as the Day of the Lord's definitive appearing in judgement and glory drew near?

Always, to the end of time, the church will be confronted by anti-Christ, the symbolic personification of all the evil on earth and of all the perpetrators of that evil.

As the whole cosmos is drawn ever closer to the unity and fulfilment decreed by its Creator, through the instrumentality of the Church, so much the more will the enraged and already half-defeated powers of evil strike out:

When humanity - work of the Creator who, dwelling within his creation, ceaselessly urges it towards the Truth - when humanity has reached a high degree of spiritual progress through the Church which vivifies and crowns it, the greater will be the danger of sin, and hence of disunion, for the temptation of the sin of pride will be greater. According to the Scriptures, Satan and anti-Christ will then have their day.

If, then, we are tempted to feel that the poor, battered churches of our day are far from *'crowning and vivifying a high degree of spiritual progress in the world'* then maybe such despondency is actually more apparent than real. Faith and hope **can** be stronger than temptation to despair, under God. Couturier's ultimate vision of unity will not allow us to give up or give in:

The Church of Christ will one day achieve the splendour of visible Unity; it will become ever more beautiful and more and more holy; although still in the shadow of faith, it will glorify the splendour of Creation in ever wider, deeper and more heartfelt praise of God the Trinity, the Creator.

Education for such a task is most certainly a life-long process, and more. Each successive generation must be educated in turn. **We** have to pass on the ecumenical torch, marvelling meanwhile at work

achieved and also at the steady and ongoing preparation of the human spirit by the Holy Spirit, forger of that Unity we long for.