

Universal Prayer

*Abbé Paul Couturier,
ecumenist, prophet, pioneer
1881~1953*



If it is true that God chooses the weak to shame the strong it is also true that he empowers the weak who are faithful to him to break down barriers. By human judgement Paul Couturier might have seemed just one simple catholic priest among others, destined to live out his life in faithful service to his flock and to the teachings of his church in early 20th century France. But God had other plans.

Many strands met together to form the Abbé's ecumenical vocation and some fifty years were needed before it could come to fruition. He was born at Lyons in 1881 and spent part of his childhood in Algeria. Ordination to the priesthood came in 1906 and this was followed by study for a degree in physical sciences. Already then his vision was opening to the wonders of God's creative purposes, to a cosmic dimension and to vistas beyond, but not ultimately opposed to the formal and sometimes restrictive spirituality of a then self-defensive church. But as yet this was but a seed, dormant and hidden underground.

The succeeding years were spent in teaching and so it might have continued. Each year, however, from 1920 to 1938, the Abbé spent a month at the home of M. Victor Carlhian as tutor to one of his daughters. The two men struck up a deep spiritual friendship which broadened the Abbé's perspective yet more and allowed it freedom to blossom. Then in 1933 Paul Couturier became a Benedictine Oblate, linked with the Monks of Unity at Amay (now at Chevetogne). This fact, together with work he had undertaken earlier with Russian refugees, drew him to experience the riches of the Orthodox tradition.

All this time the ecumenical movement was developing apace in the Protestant Churches. The Roman Church, however, stood critically and watchfully on the sidelines. Unity among Christians meant for Catholics at that time 'the return of the separated brethren to the universal fold of Peter'. The by then established January Octave of Prayer for Unity was saying precisely this. Couturier was given to see that this was a totally unacceptable approach and devoted the last twenty years of his life to bringing

about a change, first at Lyons, through the yearly tracts, or prayer leaflets, but from there the whole movement spread to become the January Week of Prayer as we know it today.

The Abbé also met up with French and Continental Protestants and established strong links of prayer and friendship with the Church of England, paying two visits to England in 1937 and 1938. Meanwhile he was writing about his broadening vision in connection with what was now termed 'The Week of Universal Prayer for Christian Unity'. The psychology was changing, from the Roman Catholic standpoint. Each denomination must be allowed to be itself and contribute its riches to the fullness of unity that Christians would one day be graced with. In the meantime all should be seeking to grow in true holiness.

Deep, persistent prayer was at the heart of this new movement, both personal and liturgical. The Abbé himself prayed in such a way, giving himself wholly, at God's inspiration, to the cause of unity. He found that others also were receiving a similar vocation, not only in the Roman Catholic Church but in many different denominations. Such souls formed, as he put it, an '*invisible monastery*', an almost world-wide network of praying souls linked together, though without formal structures. All had been granted in some degree to feel acute spiritual pain at the scandal of Christian disunity and this was felt especially during prayer, and led quite naturally to a deep sense of penitence.

However there was also joy and confidence. John Chapter 17 formed the scriptural heart of their spirituality. Jesus himself prayed for Unity on the eve of his Passion. **Can** such a prayer therefore go unanswered? A truly God-given prayer for Unity lies precisely here - a cosmic, universal prayer, Christ praying in us, and we in him, a prayer in his name, inspired by the Spirit, which must, one day, come to fruition.

Paul Couturier died on March 24th 1953, worn out by his labours, dogged as he had been by consistent poor health and having spent some time in prison during the Nazi occupation of France. Much has happened ecumenically, for better or worse, since his death, but one thing has been, and surely must continue to be, a priority: PRAYER. As we recall with gratitude the life, witness and teaching of the humble Abbé, let us ensure that the INVISIBLE MONASTERY continues to flourish in its anonymity and strength, despite our acknowledged weakness and sin - so that all might be one.

cf '*Paul Couturier and Unity in Christ*' by Geoffrey Curtis CR. SCM Press 1964.

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