

ECUMENISM

AS THE CALL OF THE HOLY SPIRIT TO CONVERSION

"There can be no ecumenism worthy of the name", declares the Second Vatican Council's Decree on Ecumenism, "without interior conversion" (UR 7). Under nine brief points I am listing here a few of the conversions effected, we believe, by the Holy Spirit which mark the path of the Ecumenical Movement over the past 50 years. Incidentally 1998, the year of the Holy Spirit for the Roman Catholics, is also the Golden Jubilee Year of the founding of the World Council of Churches (WCC).

I

The whole world knows that the call of Ecumenism in modern times came first mainly to non-Roman Catholics. Cardinal Bea, the great Bible Scholar who stood firm behind Pope John XXIII's bold overtures to the Ecumenical Movement, acknowledged this fact before a Roman Catholic audience in these words:

I should like to say that it is our separated brethren - Orthodox, Anglican and Protestant - who gave the first impulse to the modern Ecumenical Movement and that we have learnt much from them, and can learn still more.

It would take long to describe here what the Roman Catholics have learnt and can still learn, both positively and negatively, from this Movement. The fact of the matter, however, is that the Roman Catholic Church which had for long remained indifferent to Ecumenism and which had looked upon the efforts of the pioneers of the said movement as tending, in the words of pope Pius XI, towards 'a Christianity alien to the church of Christ' (*Mortalium Animas*, 1928), has in the 1960s acknowledged the Holy Spirit to be the source of this Movement and exhorted its faithful "to take active and intelligent part" in it (UR 4). This conversion in response to the call of the holy Spirit is itself a great ecumenical miracle of our times!

The Catholic Church was so converted that Pope Paul VI, immediate successor to John XXIII, making his historic visit to the WCC headquarters at Geneva in 1969 declared:

Is not the World Council a marvellous movement of Christians, of 'Children of God who are scattered abroad' and who are now searching for a recomposition in unity?

He saw his visit as a "prophetic moment, the dawn of a future day which has been awaited for centuries". Whoever anticipated such a generous encomium from the Catholic Church?! The contributions of the WCC over the past 50 years have been so impressive that a respectable Indian Journal has called it "a trend-setter in Christian thinking and action" (*Vidyajyoti*, April 1998, P.221).

II

The Roman Catholic Church takes no credit for its own conversion to Ecumenism. It attributes it all to the working of the Holy Spirit.

This sacred Council (Vatican II) firmly hopes that the initiatives of the sons of the Catholic Church joined with those of the separated brethren will go forward, without obstructing the ways of divine providence, and **without prejudging the future inspirations of the Holy Spirit** (UR 24 - emphasis added).

Incidentally, in none of the so-called "Union documents" put forward by the Roman Catholic Church at various phases of its history, such as the Union Decree of the Council of Florence (1431-45) is the Holy Spirit given any important attention! The centrality of the Holy Spirit in matters ecumenical is being affirmed today by the same Church in such unequivocal terms as

It is the Holy Spirit, dwelling in those who believe and pervading and ruling over the entire church, who brings about that wonderful communion of the faithful and joins them together so intimately that He (**the Holy Spirit**) is **the principle of Church's unity** (UR 2 - emphasis added).

It is not the orthodox teachings of the Roman Catholic Church nor its ancient traditions, nor the sevenfold sacraments, nor the threefold ministry, nor even the papacy - but the Holy Spirit dwelling within us and inviting us to conversion who is "the principle of Church's unity". A daring and risky statement indeed!

III

The Holy Spirit, declares St. Paul, has been poured into our hearts. It is the Spirit of change; and change is of the essence of all growth. Even the 'changelessness' of God has to be understood rightly.

The Spirit works primarily from within - starts by changing the attitudes and judgements in us. It is this task of the Holy Spirit which is considered by the Roman Catholic Church as the first step towards wholesome Ecumenism. The methodology as proposed to the Roman Catholics by the Second Vatican Council is

First, every effort to avoid expression, judgements and actions which do not represent the condition of our separated brethren with truth and fairness and so make mutual relations with them more difficult (UR 4).

Spirit and Truth go together (Jn 4:24). The Holy Spirit guides us to all Truth (Jn 16:13). He/She is the "Spirit of Truth" (Jn 15:17; 16:13). Untruth born of personal rivalry and lack of love has often been the primary cause of many divisions. Some would call these **non-theological factors** involved in Christian disunity. God and theology have nothing to do with it!

Historians, for example, still wonder if Cyril of Alexandria did not use the Council of Ephesus in 431, to the extent of bribing the Fathers of the Council (!), to do away with Nestorius, his archrival and the occupant of the coveted see of Constantinople. Similar suspicion persists with regard to what Rome did to Photius later.

St. Augustine's words would constitute an eternally effective prescription of the Holy Spirit for the malady of Christian and even human disunity: **in essentials unity, in doubtful matters liberty and in everything charity.**

More than mega structures it is the attitudinal changes or conversion that really matter for Ecumenism. There is no ecumenism worthy of the name without interior conversion (UR 7). "Metanoiete" is still the clarion call of the Spirit of Jesus to the divided Church and the fragmented humanity.

It is indeed very unfortunate that the **invitation** for the churches to be themselves converted had, often for political reasons, become a **command** to convert others! Missionaries called Mathew 28:20 the greatest command, ignoring entirely John 13:34-35! The Holy Spirit has to start reforming the churches all over again.

IV

Thus far we spoke mostly of conversions on the part of the Roman Catholic Church. Let us not forget that thanks to the Ecumenical Movement non-Catholic Christians too are being converted to the Spirit of Truth. They have indeed, to use the words of Cardinal Bea quoted above, "learnt much and can still learn more" from the Catholic Church.

To cite but a few instances:

- a. The Modern Ecumenical movement has admirably highlighted the Catholic position that human beings are **responsible** for building a just world and that they can and should **co-operate** with God in this task. In other words, the Modern Ecumenical movement has implicitly and consistently ignored the traditional Protestant (in some way Augustinian) view of man as totally corrupt, as **massa damnata**.

The Catholic appreciation of the goodness of human nature even after the Fall underlies such WCC programs as **Indigenous People and Human Rights, Ecumenical Action on Racism, Churches in Solidarity with Women** (all presently under Unit III of WCC activities), **Community and Justice, Gospel and Culture (Unit II), Advocacy and Action with the Poor and Meeting Urgent Human Needs (Unit IV)**. The old Protestant contempt for the fallen human nature and the consequent belief in divine Predestination would render the above mentioned WCC programs simply unthinkable!

- b. Thanks again to the Ecumenical Movement, Protestants have begun to appreciate the Catholic concern for the role of "Tradition" in preserving and comprehending the transmitted Word of God. The battle cry of **Sola Scriptura** (Scripture alone would do) is seldom heard within the ecumenical camps. All this is consequent upon the acceptance that the Holy Spirit is above both Scripture and Tradition. The Spirit blows where He/She wills (Jn 3:8).
- c. Again, the WCC through its Faith and Order conferences has gradually nudged towards the Roman Catholic understanding of the sacraments and the three-fold ministry of Bishop-Priest-Deacon. The most momentous of these has been the so-called Lima Document on Baptism, Eucharist and Ministry (BEM). Space and time do not permit us to go into the centrality assigned to the Holy Spirit in the BEM document.

V

Constant conversions mark the journey of the modern Ecumenical Movement. The earlier medieval and pre-modern moves towards unity were vitiated by refusal on the part of the churches to listen to each other and to convert.

- a. A major lesson the Roman Catholic Church has learnt from the Ecumenical Movement under the power of the Holy Spirit and thus a major conversion on her part is that it is finally willing to distinguish between the divine and the human in the Christian structure of things. For the Roman Catholic Church until recently almost everything, be it doctrine or discipline or ministry, was of divine sanction (**de jure divino**) - including, as a German Catholic theologian of the 19th century in India claimed, the use of Latin in the liturgy!

It was indeed a revolutionary step forward when the Roman Catholic Church, under the influence of the Ecumenical Movement, in its Decree on Ecumenism at Vatican II admitted the relativity of doctrinal formulations or as it called a "hierarchy" in truths.

When comparing doctrines with one another, they (Catholic theologians) should remember that in Catholic doctrine

there exists an order or "hierarchy" of truths, since they vary in their relation to the foundation of Christian faith (UR 11).

Some have hailed this statement as the most revolutionary step the Roman Catholic Church has taken towards unity. If everything is not of equal importance, then there is certainly room for dialogue and discussion, reevaluation and review. Thus unity becomes possible despite diversity in non-essentials. A new model for Catholicity is born.

- b. Another conversion on the part of the Roman Catholic Church has been its willingness to admit in all humility that

...some, even very many of the most significant elements and endowments which together go to build up and give life to the Church itself can exist outside the visible boundaries of the Catholic Church: the written Word of God; the life of grace; faith, hope and charity with other interior gifts of the Holy Spirit, as well as visible elements. All of these which come from Christ and lead back to Him **belong by right to the One Church of Christ** (UR 3 - emphasis added).

By this bold admission it is made clear that the "One Church of Christ" or what the ancient Fathers called the **Una Sancta** is larger than individual and fragmented churches including the Roman Catholic Church.

If the second Vatican Council in its **Constitution on the Church** (LG 8) spoke of the Church of Christ "subsisting in" the Catholic Church, it was not, as serious scholars who have gone into the history and context of the phrase "subsist in" point out, to claim that the substance (!) of the Church of Christ was with the Roman Catholics, but to simply state that the one Church of Christ continues to be alive and active in the Roman Catholic Church despite its sinfulness and divisions within it from the very beginning. In other churches too the One Church of Christ is alive and active as the following admission of the same Council bears out:

It follows that the separated churches and communities as such, though **we believe** they suffer from defects already mentioned, have been by no means deprived of significance and importance in the mystery of salvation. **For the Spirit of God has not refrained from using them as means of salvation (UR 3 -emphasis added).**

In other words, what Yves Congar called the old "hierarcheology" (juridical ecclesiology) is being abandoned in favour of a pneumatic ecclesiology. The **Pneuma** (Holy Spirit) is naturally greater than any one church. The working of the Spirit still remains a **mysterion**, a hidden and deeper reality, not restricted by the historically conditioned threefold or fourfold ministry. This is best reflected in the Council's **Constitution on the Church** which opens with a profound chapter of the "Mystery of the Church".

- c. It is very regrettable that many traditional Roman Catholics have scant respect for the ordained ministry among the non-Catholic Christians and often no faith at all in the depth of their religiosity (The obverse side of the matter is that traditional Protestants look down upon Roman Catholics as idolaters with no real spirituality!).

The Roman Catholic Church even went to the extent of declaring that there could be no real martyr among the non-Catholics. At the Council of Florence (1431-45), for example, in the context of a proposed union with the Armenian, Greek and Coptic churches Rome declared that "no one can be saved, no matter how much alms he has given, even if he sheds his blood for the name of Christ, unless he remains in the bosom and unity of the Catholic Church" (Neuner - Dupuis, 810 - emphasis added).

Now a veritable conversion on the part of the Roman Catholic Church in this regard has taken place. It is seen in the declaration of Vatican II that:

it is right and salutary to recognize the riches of Christ and virtuous works in the lives of others (non-Catholic Christians) who are bearing witness to Christ, sometimes even to the shedding of their blood (UR 4).

- d. ecumenical calls for repentance and reevaluation of past verdicts, as could be seen, for example, from a comparison of the following official Roman Catholic assessments of Martin Luther's life and work.

The 1521 **Edict of Worms** issued by the then religio-political supreme authority of Europe (Pope and Emperor combined) reads:

This fellow (Martin Luther) appears to be not so much a man as the **wicked demon** in the form of a man and under the cowl of a monk (emphasis added).

The 1970 statement of Cardinal Willebrandt of the then Secretariate for promoting Christian Unity at the Lutheran World Federation:

Who would deny today that Martin Luther was a **profoundly religious personality** who sought after the message of the Gospel with honesty and abnegation? . . . The Second Vatican Council itself has welcomed some of the demands made by Martin Luther, by which several aspects of Christian faith and life are better expressed than before (emphasis added).

Thanks to the Holy Spirit and the Ecumenical Movement several histories are being rewritten today. This applies to almost all the so-called "heretics" of the Roman Catholic Church - not only Nestorius and Photius and Luther.

VI

One must frankly admit that a certain sense of self-importance and self-righteousness had often characterised the dealings of the Roman Catholic Church with the other churches. A Big Brother attitude was often visible. At one point of time it hesitated to call others 'churches'. They were merely 'separated brethren' and 'ecclesial communities'. The offensive nature of these appellations was seldom internalised. Paul's advice that you "in humility count others better than yourselves" (Phil 2:3) was thought to be inapplicable to the Roman Catholics!

This attitude was given a dramatic touch by Karl Barth in his reply to Jean Danielou, the Roman Catholic theologian who complained to the

former that delegates from his church were not officially invited to the inauguration of the WCC at Amsterdam in 1948. "Your church", wrote Karl Barth, "could simply not have sat next to us, but (visibly or invisibly) above us!"

Converted by the Holy Spirit, the Roman Catholic Church recognises today the utmost significance of baptism and the radical equality it confers on all the baptised. In the words of the Council:

. . . in spite of them (differences) it remains true that all who have been justified by faith in baptism are incorporated into (made a member of the Body of) Christ; they therefore have a right to be called Christians and with good reason are accepted as brothers by the children of the Catholic Church (UR 3).

At baptism one does not become a Catholic or Lutheran! At baptism one is reborn a Christian first and then grows into a Catholic or Lutheran. The distinction made by the Chinese theologian C.H. Hwang between **the confessing and confessional church** has been the guiding light on the path of Ecumenism. To quote his in full:

The sad thing is that, before becoming first a confessing church in the missionary situation, the younger churches were prematurely projected into a "confessional" situation which was not their own, that is, before they knew and became a community of Christ they were told to become a Prebyterian, Lutheran, Methodist or Anglican Church. I believe that the way to recover the unity of the Church on the road is to **return to the confessing church first and only secondly to become a confessional church . . .** (emphasis added)

In short, Ecumenism is the call of the Holy Spirit to return to the basic teaching of Paul that "there is one body and one spirit, just as you were called to the one hope that belongs to your call, one Lord, one faith, one baptism . . ." (Gal 4:4-5) and "For by one Spirit we were all baptized into one body - Jews or Greeks, slaves or free - and all were made to drink of one Spirit" (1 Cor 12:13).

It is this call of the Holy spirit that renders the Roman Catholic Church content with being one among many members in more than 20 commissions of the WCC. It is also the same Spirit who makes the Roman Catholic Church go slow in the matter of joining the WCC as a full-fledged member.

Some are under the impression that this church is too proud to become a full member of the WCC. Quite different, however, are the real reasons as listed below by Ans. J. Van der Bent, the librarian of the World Council.

The eventual membership of the Roman Catholic Church in the World Council of Churches is still a wide open question. Because of its hierarchical structure and its sheer numerical weight, the Roman Catholic Church would create a whole series of new administrative and psychological problems, not to mention the theological ones, if it entered the World Council as a full member. Its membership, in fact, would require a change in the Council's constitution, alter the Council's character and create an entirely new situation (**What in the World is the World Council of Churches**, 1979, pp.29-30).

It is a fact that despite several doctrinal agreements and increasing bonhomie at various levels, sharp differences still persist between churches over matters of moral principles and disciplinary directives such as divorce, use of contraceptives, recourse to abortion, ordination of women and intercommunion. In these matters it is necessary, as the Book of Revelation recommends, "to listen to what the Spirit is saying to the churches" (2:7, 11, 29; 3:6, 13, 22).

It may be that further conversion is being called for with regard to the Roman Catholic Church's attitude towards divorce, ordination of women and intercommunion. Let us remember the Council's warning to the churches, cited above, against "prejudging the future inspiration of the Holy Spirit" (UR 24).

VII

Another conversion of utmost importance on the part of several mainline churches in recent times has been the way they begin to appreciate the living faiths of other people. In this, Ecumenism stands squarely opposed to the spirit of the fast growing pentecostalism in the Indian churches.

It is good to remember here that the roots of modern Ecumenism lie in the religious universalism of the last decades of the nineteenth century as concretely expressed in the convening of the World parliament of Religions in Chicago in 1893 in which Swami Vivekanandā participated. It is against this spirit of large-hearted understanding of other religions that fundamentalism of the (un)Christian brand broke forth, first in North America and then all over the world. Strangely enough, the first promoters of modern Ecumenism were also preachers of the Pentecostal type such as John R. Mott (1865-1955), a faithful disciple of Dwight L. Moody (1837-990) the hardcore evangelical of the 19th century!

Today prominent ecumenists such as Hans Kueng are being converted into promoters of fellowship of faiths, fruitful coexistence of religions. This we believe is the fresh call of the Holy Spirit to the Ecumenical Movement for reasons such as the following: the power hungry churches need to return to the praxis of Jesus which was, as Swami Vivekananda would say, for "assimilation and not destruction"; there is no other means to arrest the unscrupulous politicisation of religion; the time has come to wipe away the bad memories of the old missionary method in colonial Afro-Asia; above all, the need to pool together the resources of **all religions** for renewing humanity from within.

Conversion to a sincere appreciation and even assimilation of the values of other religions is indeed a legitimate and welcome dimension of Ecumenism. It is not, however, without its toll. Theologians, pastors and ordinary christians are confused over what has happened to our erstwhile claims for the uniqueness of Jesus Christ and rejection of all 'syncretism'.

Here again we are in need of the assistance of the Holy Spirit to come through these confused times.

VIII

Along with activities towards co-operation among peoples of different religions (or what is rather incorrectly termed interfaith 'dialogue'), is the concern of the modern Ecumenical Movement for this world and for a this-world spirituality. This marks, as we said above, a definitive conversion of Protestantism towards the consistent Roman Catholic call to human beings to co-operate with God in building a better world (Vatican II's **Church in the Modern World** 39, 44).

This world has always been the focal point even when the member churches were searching for closer unity among themselves. Thus the very first Assembly of the WCC in 1948 at Amsterdam deliberated on the theme "**Man's Disorder and God's Design**", pointing of course, to the mess Europeans had made of the world through the so-called second world war. From then on the themes of the Assemblies have been on this world: Christ - the Hope of the world, in 1954 at Evanston; Jesus Christ - the Light of the World, in 1961 at New Delhi; Behold I Make All Things New, in 1968 at Uppsala; Jesus Christ Liberates and Unites, in 1975 at Nairobi; Jesus Christ - the Hope of the World, in 1983 at Vancouver; Come, Holy Spirit - Renew all Creation, in 1991 at Canberra.

This concern for the condition of people living in this world would not surprise those who know the antecedents of the modern Ecumenical Movement. It was rooted, as we said above, in the life and work conferences which in turn were born of the powerful "Social Gospel" movement in various parts of the world in the late 19th and 20th centuries. Hence the WCC as it was reorganised in 1971 had a programme unit II called Justice and Service which consumed the largest portion of the WCC's annual budget. This Programme Unit encompassed such controversial project as "Programme to combat Racism". The WCC was ready to fight! Political involvement of the churches on behalf of the enslaved was no more a taboo!

Parallel to this aggressive mood in WCC, in the Roman Catholic Church also, thanks to such seminal thinkers like Teilhard de Chardin (for whom matter too is a spiritual reality) certain subtle development in the form of conversion to this world was taking place which reached its

climax in the issuance by Vatican II of the revolutionary document called **The Church in the Modern World** (1965).

Perhaps encouraged by the above document, the WCC at its Assembly at Uppsala in 1968 shocked the conservative Christians by its declaration that the "World sets the agenda for the churches!".

IX

What more do you need to create a crisis in modern Ecumenism?!

All this - learning from other religions and working for this world - is deeply upsetting traditional Christians. These are the two things the churches had always taught them to flee from - other religions and this world! No wonder, some lesser churches are deserting the ranks of the WCC. No wonder also, Pentecostal escapism which promotes the cult of instant miracles along with individualistic spirituality is gaining upperhand over the Ecumenical spirit of yesteryears in Christian communities.

Ecumenism is obviously at crossroads today. Criticism is mounting against the incursion of Ecumenism into the world of 'dirty politics'. Danger alarms are being sounded against its increasing bonhomie with 'pagan' religions. What will be its future?

With these questions in mind the WCC is entering its 8th Assembly at Harare, Zimbabwe during 3 to 14 December 1998.

Significantly enough, the theme of the Harare Assembly will itself be conversion under the Biblical formula **Turn to God - Rejoice in Hope**. What will be the outcome of this desired conversion for the future of Ecumenism nobody is able to foresee, though tentative predictions in this regard have been coming out of the Central Committee of the WCC. We are however warned by the Vatican Council not to prejudge the future inspirations of the Holy Spirit!

[Certain portions of this Paper were used for a talk in Tamil to a Clergy Fellowship at the Thozhamai Illam, Centre for Inter-Religious Dialogue, at Kanyakumari on May 04, 1998]

J. Rosario Narchison