

COMMENTS

THE SACRAMENT OF ORDERS

(Notes on the Ministry and the Sacraments in the Ecumenical Movement.)

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Our purpose is not to give a history of the ecumenical movement in its modern form, but to isolate one of the problems it seeks to solve. The problem is that of the Ministry and the Sacraments. The explicit point treated will be the theological implications of the progress so far made in solving that problem.

Readers will be familiar with the two-fold aim of the ecumenical movement as originally conceived, unity on the question (i) of life and work; (ii) of faith and orders. The assumption that Christians of different views might cooperate in practical works of necessity and mercy guaranteed some success on the life and work program. The assumption that each had a duty to maintain his own theology unimpaired militated against complete success on the faith and order program. The acceptance of these assumptions, and the acknowledgement of their limitations, kept theological issues in the background at the Edinburgh Conference of 1910, and at the Stockholm Conference of 1925. With the calling of the Lausanne Conference in 1927, theological issues were of necessity brought into the foreground, and have remained there since. The impossibility of maintaining the line originally drawn between doctrine and life is admitted.¹ The present position has been thus stated; "If the ecumenical movement is to go forward towards assured success, it must be rooted in a common faith to which it is possible to give theological formulation."² The difficulties confronted, making necessary such a statement and such a program, can be indicated by isolating the question of the Ministry and the Sacraments. It is hoped that a norm will be here given, according to which a Catholic can measure progress and evaluate agreements reached. To give special point to this brief discussion, one historic instance of efforts at reunion and its results will be first summarized; then the present efforts of American Presbyterian and Episcopalian Churches to effect union will be considered.

In the year 1857, a society was formed in London for promoting the Unity of Christendom. Some Catholics, lay and ecclesiastic, gave their names to this Society, and articles were written, under Catholic names approving the same. This set of facts came to the attention of the Holy Office, and in a letter to the English Bishops, dated September 16, 1864,

¹William Adams Brown, *Journal of Religion*, xviii (1938), 256.

²*Ibid.*, 257.

the Holy Office forbade Catholics to belong to this Society. The decree asserted that the Society was founded on the view that Roman Catholics, Greek Schismatics and Anglicans, with equal right, claimed the name Catholic. This view, the decree said, was founded on the principle that the true Church of Jesus Christ consisted partly of the Roman Church, partly of the Photian Schism and the Anglican heresy, and that the two latter have equally with the Roman Church, one Lord, one Faith and one Baptism. That Catholics should pray for unity according to an intention stained and infected by heresy in a high degree, could in no way be tolerated, the Holy Office decided.³ This Decree called forth a letter in answer, signed by one hundred and ninety-eight Clergy of the Church of England, saying that they were simply stating a fact in claiming the name Catholic for their Church, avowing that their aim was that there "may be one Fold and one Shepherd."⁴ The letter was addressed to Cardinal Patrizi, Prefect of the Holy Office, and he answered in a letter setting forth the only method of achieving true union, return to the One, Holy, Catholic and Apostolic Church.⁵

It is interesting to note that the now acknowledged impossibility of maintaining the line originally drawn between life and doctrine, in the renascent ecumenical movement, echoes the analysis of the Society for the Unity of Christendom of 1857, contained in the letter of the Holy Office, forbidding Catholics to participate in the movement. The pronouncement of the invalidity of Anglican Orders, by Pope Leo XIII,⁶ need only be mentioned here. It clearly rendered impossible the aims of those promoting the Society for the Unity of Christendom, as far as that movement sought the recognition of Rome for one of its major claims, valid Orders. It also supplies Catholics with a norm for measuring the results of efforts to solve the Ministry problem in the present ecumenical movement.

The principles enunciated in the refusal to allow Catholics to be members of the Society for the Unity of Christendom of 1857, were confirmed anew in 1919. The letter of the Holy Office of 1864 was reprinted as part of an instruction concerning the participation of Catholics in meetings of whatsoever kind, called by non-Catholics, which have for their aim the procuring of the union of all communions which claim for themselves the name of Christian.⁷ The occasion of this new decree was an invitation to participate in the World Conference of Christians, the American Episcopal Commission to that Conference having been received by Pope Benedict XV, in May, 1919. Participation in the Lausanne Conference of

³Acta Sanctae Sedis, II, 657.

⁴ASS, II, 661.

⁵ASS, II, 662.

⁶Acta Sanctae Sedis, XXIX, 193. Denzinger-Bannwart (Edition 21-23, 1937, 1963).

⁷Acta Apostolicae Sedis, XI, 309.

1927 was forbidden, and the instruction, that the decree of July 4, 1919, which had repeated the letter of September 16, 1864, was to be adhered to, was given.⁸ Thus we have a very early indication of the awareness of Rome of the difficulties such Conferences must inevitably encounter, and a consistent statement of the principle on which refusal to participate was based. We have also, in the decision on Anglican Orders, and the reason for pronouncing them invalid, an expression of a point much agitated in the discussions on the Ministry and the Sacraments in the various World Conferences on Faith and Order held up to the present. Concretely, the difficulty comes in answering the two questions: "Is the Eucharist a Sacrifice as well as a Sacrament?" "Is Ordination of Divine Institution, demanding Apostolic Succession, a Sacramental Rite?" For the attitude towards Orders is necessarily colored by the attitude towards the Eucharist. The attitude towards the Eucharist is necessarily colored by the attitude towards the Redemptive Act of Christ.

The difference in opinion is marked. One need but to read the views expressed at Lausanne,⁹ and the report of the theological commission appointed by the continuation committee of the Faith and Order Movement to realize this.¹⁰ This latter commission, as is well known, prepared the doctrinal views for discussion on the subject of the Ministry and the Sacraments, for the Conference held in August, 1937, at Edinburgh. In fact, if we exclude the Orthodox and a section of the Anglicans, discussions are based on the assumption that the Catholic notion of the Eucharist as a Sacrifice is to be excluded; that Orders is not a Sacrament; that the Redemption has not objective value.¹¹ The immediate goal has been, in some cases, the mutual recognition of the ministry in the various denominations, in such a way that the minister of one Church may be permitted to serve the congregation of another. With interdenominational communion established on this basis, further doctrinal unity would be sought.¹² But even these efforts prove unavailing, without some previous agreement on doctrinal questions.

It is not our purpose here to discuss all these efforts, but to single out one. The difficulties encountered are symptomatic of the problems met with in all such efforts. For over fifty years attempts have been made to effect union between the Presbyterian and Episcopalian Churches in the United States of America. In the Summer of 1938 a proposed Concordat was issued, which had for its purpose the providing of means whereby each Church might, wherever it seemed locally desirable, assume pastoral care of the members

⁸AAS, XIX, 278.

⁹*Faith and Order*, Lausanne 1927 (Doran Co., N. Y., 1927), 232-283 Ministry; 286-317 Sacraments.

¹⁰*The Ministry and the Sacraments* (McMillan Co., 1937).

¹¹*Ibid.* See Index on Eucharist, Sacrament, Sacrifice, etc.

¹²*cf. South India Schemes*, W. J. Sparrow Simpson, London, 1930.

Also, *Report of Anglican-Rumanian Commission*, London, 1936.

of the other Church, and offer them the privilege of holy communion. The proposed Concordat¹³ admits that, historically, the fundamental difficulty in arriving at intercommunion lay in the differing views regarding the Ministry which each Church held. Presbyterians recognized the validity of Episcopalian Orders. But a Presbyterian minister entering the ministry of the Episcopalian Church was required to accept reordination. As a means to achieve organic unity, each Church now recognizes the spiritual efficacy of the other's ministry of the Word and Sacraments. It is to be noted that the recognition of spiritual efficacy, in effect, transmits the question of validity. Spiritual efficacy simply means that God sometimes uses even an invalid Sacrament as the means of conferring grace, due to the faith of the recipient.¹⁴ The provisions made in the Concordat for extending Episcopalian ministry to a Presbyterian minister, inclines one to the view that the invalidity of Presbyterian orders, in Episcopalian eyes, is still a difficulty. For, before ministering in the Episcopalian Church, a Presbyterian minister must satisfy the Episcopalian bishop as to his qualifications. The bishop then lays his hands on the Presbyterian minister's head and says the following prayer: "Take thou authority to execute the office of a presbyter in this Church now committed to thee by the imposition of our hands. In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Ghost. Amen."¹⁵ This ceremony and provision seems to indicate reordination. It is true that the Concordat provides that the moderator of the presbytery concerned shall proceed in the same manner, and use the same sentence, in the case of an Episcopalian minister wishing to minister in the Presbyterian Church. But, since the Presbyterian Church recognizes the validity of Episcopalian orders, there can be no suspicion in this of reordination. Thus the difficulty was met, and seemed to be settled satisfactorily.

However, objections were raised to the proposed Concordat. The suspicion that this was surreptitious ordination was voiced. Just what did this ceremony mean? A revised Concordat, of June, 1939, meets the objections and answers the question.¹⁶ The notable new provisions are these. Each Church recognizes the Ministry of the other as "a real ministry of the Word and Sacraments within its own sphere." The principle upon which the Concordat is based is expressed in the proposition that, in a divided Church, no ministry possesses such universal recognition of its validity as is essential for organic unity, and so, mutual extension of ordination is proposed. It is now explicitly stated that this shall not be regarded as reordination, but as a recognition of an ordination valid in the body conferring it, and adding thereto a supplementary ordination, as required for the ministry in the

¹³See *Christendom*, IV 1 (1939), Appendix.

¹⁴*The Ministry and the Sacraments*, 127.

¹⁵*Christendom*, I.c.

¹⁶*The Churchman*, August, 1939.

other Church. The revised Concordat further accepts the propositions that the ministry is part of God's will for His Church; the succession of the ministry is the visible sign of the continuous life of the Church; the laying on of hands is the Apostolic method of continuing the succession of the ministry. It is clear, from these additions, that each Church can retain, absolutely unimpaired, its own doctrinal interpretation of the propositions. Yet that very possibility drives the Episcopalians farther from their historical position on orders. For their understanding of Apostolic succession differs from that of the Presbyterians.¹⁷ Thus there is a compromise which settles nothing doctrinally. Nor is there absolute assurance that the revised Concordat will be accepted. There the case rests for the moment.

The difficulty encountered in this question of orders is typical of the difficulties met with in other matters. And the reason for the difficulties is, ultimately, the same. While it is possible to isolate one problem for purposes of consideration, Christian life remains an organic whole, and Christian Faith and Christian Orders are part of that whole. Hence, the final and adequate solution of any one difficulty is intimately connected with the final and adequate solution of the whole problem. The place of the Sacraments in the discussions is assuming ever greater proportions. And rightly so. For, applied to the concrete case we have chosen, if Orders is in no sense a Sacrament, if the Eucharist is not a propitiatory Sacrifice, it is not vitally important that an ordained person minister the Eucharist, however fitting and desirable it may be. If Orders is recognized as a Sacrament, if the chief duty of the ordained priest is the offering of the Sacrifice of the Eucharist (not denying the place which ministering the Word and the Sacraments holds), then a completely new and correct theological view is acquired. That theological view is correct Soteriologically and Christologically. The Redemption and the Divinity of Christ assume their proper place. The Trinity is seen in a new light. God's plan for man's salvation is conceived aright. The fitness and proportion of the Catholic doctrine on the Trinity, Incarnation, Atonement, Grace, the Sacraments and the Church is appreciated. Because the problems are interrelated, progress in the efforts to achieve organic unity will not be true progress until doctrinal unanimity on these points is reached. When will that unanimity be reached? When men ponder in their souls the question Jesus addressed to His disciples: "But whom do you say that I am?"¹⁸ and, by the grace of God, are brought to the feet of the successor of the one who answered for all the true followers of Jesus: "Thou art Christ, the Son of the living God."¹⁹

¹⁷*Faith and Order*, p. 274 sqq. (Presbyterian);

The Ministry and the Sacraments, p. 76 sqq. (Presbyterian and Episcopalian).

¹⁸Matthew, 16, 15.

¹⁹Matthew, 16, 16.