

philippine studies

Ateneo de Manila University · Loyola Heights, Quezon City · 1108 Philippines

The Catholic and Ecumenism

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Philippine Studies vol. 12, no. 1 (1964): 149–159

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Fri June 30 13:30:20 2008

Review Article

The Catholic and Ecumenism

The irony of viewing the pontificate of John XXIII as transitional is that it is true, but true in a sense more radical and far-reaching in its effects in both time and space than many at the time of his election in 1958 would have allowed. It formally led the Church out of the narrow confines of apologetic authoritarianism, which had characterized much of Catholic thought since the Counter-Reformation, into a sober ecumenism more properly becoming to her spirit of charity. Father Gregory Baum's book¹ is one of several attempts by theologians involved in ecumenical discussions throughout the world to provide Catholics with an insight into ecumenism not only in order that they may be favorably disposed towards discussions concerning the reunion of Christian Churches, but, more important, in order that their own life and worship may gain by the sudden rush of "fresh air" let in by Pope John's program of *aggiornamento*.

The reunion of Christendom is far from being imminent, Father Baum himself admits, but progress towards that distant moment can be achieved only by the deepening and broadening of Catholic perspective. This is not to say that the Catholic Church has been, in the totality of her doctrine and practice, narrow, but that her defensive posture since the close of the

¹ PROGRESS AND PERSPECTIVES: THE CATHOLIC QUEST FOR CHRISTIAN UNITY. By Gregory Baum, O.S.A. New York: Sheed and Ward, 1962. x, 245 pp.

Renaissance has caused many of her clergy and teachers to either underplay or overlook certain aspects of her Wisdom. Father Baum has undertaken in this book to help Catholics recapture the full and proper perspective of their Church. *Progress and Perspectives*, according to its author, has been written not "simply to give information. It is also a plea. Its purpose is to create a sense of urgency among Catholics," to stimulate them out of that feeling of smugness that more often than not creeps upon them with the superficial realization that they belong to the true Church of Christ, into a sincere examen concerning their own role in the divisions of the past. Father Baum suggests that with the genuine appreciation of what membership in Christ's Church means, a "public admission of our guilt and the ready acknowledgment of our need for a *metanoia* as a group give more powerful witness to the holiness of the Church than do the eager attempts to whitewash the past and to shirk the responsibility for history."

To avoid misunderstanding—lest for the wrong reasons he be praised by Protestants or condemned by Catholics—Father Baum begins his book with a clear statement of his assumptions. He writes:

I take for granted the theological basis of the Catholic ecumenical movement. We believe that the Catholic Church is the one true Church of Jesus Christ, united to him as his earthly body; but we also believe that men outside the Church in good faith who confess Jesus Christ as God and Savior and are baptized in water and the Holy Ghost are truly Christian, reborn in Christ, alive in the Spirit, and hence, despite their separation, our Christian brethren. I take for granted in these pages that Christian faith and supernatural charity are found in communities beyond the visible boundaries of the Catholic Church, and that Christians guiltlessly separated from us have access to sacramental grace and spiritual life.

What follow are essays on the universality of the Church's mission as the basis for ecumenism, and on the rise, development and maintenance of a proper ecumenical atmosphere among Catholics. Appropriately appended are two pastoral letters, the first on the responsibilities of Catholics with regard to Christian unity by Paul-Emile Cardinal Leger, Archbishop

of Montreal, and the second on racial prejudice by Achille Cardinal Liénart, Bishop of Lille.

By referring to the unity of the Church as "dynamic" rather than "static", as "missionary" rather than "conservative", Father Baum succeeds in presenting this property of the Church in all its fullness, at the same time getting away from the usual one-sided, even if legitimate and sometimes necessary, approach of apologetics. Post-Reformation Catholic doctrine in general emphasized, in its struggle against Protestantism, the visible and external unity of the Church, "that is, the historical links binding together Catholics in the unity of the same faith, the same rites, and the same government," and this often at the expense of its "deeper" significance which includes all the "gifts of grace and charity which Christ has acquired for mankind on the cross." Father Baum notes that unity in this context may lead Catholics to conclude that "the promises of the gospel that the Church be one are fulfilled in our midst." But this neglects the dynamism of Catholic unity which should incline "the Church toward humanity... imbuing her with power to remove the obstacles that separate men." According to him, "the unity of the Church inclines the Christian people to encounter the world and empowers the Church to heal obstacles to unity set by sin. The unity of the Church is not closed, bending the Church back into itself, creating a new barrier in this world; on the contrary, it is open, making the Church a center from which unity proceeds, radiating into humanity the unifying power of divine grace." Father Baum then makes the observation, really contained in Catholic doctrine but often forgotten by many, that "to be Catholic means to feel responsible for all men." To bear this Christian responsibility well, it is not enough to work for the conversion of individuals; "the proportions of our disunity are so enormous and have shaped so powerfully the history of centuries, that it would be unrealistic to consider the quest for individual conversions as a true confrontation with the burning problem of Christian disunity. This confrontation takes place only in the ecumenical movement." In the last analysis, ecumenism is nothing but a "movement within the Catholic Church herself,

renewing her life and worship according to the pattern of Scripture and the liturgy, discovering the universality of her vocation, and making room in herself for all Christian values and authentic spiritualities, even those found imperfectly outside her borders." These are not the empty assertions of a wild-eyed radical, rather, they are conclusions drawn from scriptural premises by a first-rate theologian, a consultant of the Secretariat of Christian Unity in Rome and the head of the newly-formed Center of Ecumenical Studies in Toronto.

Though in a sense the ecumenism of the Church dates as far back in history as that moment after the Pentecost when the apostles were heard to speak in diverse tongues, its application to non-Catholic Christians is relatively recent. It begins with the loving regard with which Pope Leo XIII addresses the dissident Churches of the East in his many writings, and it develops during the pontificate of Pius XI, when, for the first time, "official documents of the Catholic Church concede that the obstacles to reconciliation [between East and West] are not all on the side of the Orientals." For the first time too, it is suggested that a reconciliation would benefit not only the East, as was always taught before, but also the West. "With this new humility," Father Baum writes, "goes a deeper realization on the part of Pius XI that the separated Eastern Churches are alive with grace and holiness." This renewed interest in the Churches of the East leads to the establishment then of the Oriental Institute in Rome.

A thaw in Catholic-Protestant relations does not take place officially until the pontificate of Pius XII. If it seems longer in coming than that which took place in the nineteenth century between the East and West, the differences dividing Protestantism from Catholicism, one must remember, are more profound. Father Baum reminds us that "Protestant Christians, of whatever Church, are not united by ecclesiastical and sacramental structures as are the Eastern Churches. Protestants have not, moreover, retained the ancient creeds with the faultless fidelity we find in Eastern traditions." We nevertheless detect in the politeness and charity with which Pope Leo XIII wrote his letters to the Christians of England, Scot-

land and Germany the beginnings of the contemporary ecumenical approach of Catholics towards Protestants. Its first signs of development do not occur until Pope Pius XII reveals the "new approach" to Protestantism in his first encyclical, *Summi Pontificatus*. In it he refers to Protestants as "those who, though not belonging to the visible body of the Catholic Church, have given noble and sincere expression to their appreciation of all that unites them to us, in love for the person of Christ or in belief in God." In the pontificate of Pius XII too the Holy Office published the Instruction "On the Ecumenical Movement." If to today's readers these Instructions seem less positive and encouraging than when they were first published, "it must be remembered," Father Baum writes, "that this was the first Roman document acknowledging the holiness of the world-wide ecumenical movement, and encouraging Catholics to take a part in it."

For a more positive development of Catholic ecumenical attitudes toward Protestantism we must look to the pontificate of John XXIII. "Through his personality, his speeches, and especially through the convocation of a General Council, he has created what has been called a new atmosphere in the Church." Two points, according to Father Baum, "characterize Pope John's remarkable contribution to the evolution of present-day Catholic ecumenism:" the first is that, "as Pius XI had done before the Orthodox" Churches, he has confessed "the Catholic share of the responsibility for our unhappy division" before all men; and the second is his statement that the "great contribution of the Catholic Church to the common quest for Christian unity is to seek her own reform." Father Baum presses the point in this place that all these changes in Catholic attitudes toward non-Catholic Christians have been accomplished with absolutely no strain whatsoever on Catholic orthodoxy.

Father Baum is most lucid and penetrating when he tries to answer two questions which he raises about the disunity of Christendom: can we learn anything in the Bible about the meaning of our present situation? Why does Christ allow that his followers, his own brethren, those who believe in his resur-

rection, be disunited in distinct communities? The second question, in Father Baum's estimation, is not as theoretical as it might seem at first glance. "We must ask ourselves," he writes, "what God wants to teach us through these divisions. One of the great messages of Scriptures is that the events of history have a meaning."

To the first question Father Baum answers in the affirmative. He tells us that whatever gift "we receive [from Christ] must unceasingly be ratified by an inner conversion." He continues that "what is true of Christ's gift to individuals is also true of the divine equipment bequeathed upon the Church. All is freely given, her unity among the most precious gifts; but all must be daily sought in repentance." Each time the Jews neglect the radical dynamism of their election, they are plagued with schism, and then too this dynamism manifests itself in the camps of their enemies.

For his answer to the second question Father Baum appeals to the "original theology of unity and heresy in the Church" propounded by Johann Moehler in his book *Einheit in der Kirche*. Father Baum writes:

For Moehler, Christianity is, above all, life: it is life before it is doctrine, it is life before it is a sacramental gift or a society containing it. . . . Life is reality seen in its constant growth and development and unfolding. Life is in motion precisely because it contains within itself tensions and opposites which it constantly reconciles. Life gives birth to new life because it must forever overcome and synthesize the contrasts within itself. Considering the Church primarily as a life communicated by the Holy Ghost, Moehler understands the Catholic Church as an organic unity of vital tensions constantly bringing forth new life. According to Moehler, opposing trends within the Church, far from being marks of her weakness, are really signs of her untiring vitality, since such opposition generates new life, reconciling the contrasts in a higher unity of one and the same charity. . . . The binding force of these contrasting movements is the charity which makes men qualify their spiritualities through cohesion with the whole Church.

When a man or a group of Christians weakens in charity and withdraws from the community, cutting itself away from the sharing and reconciling which the Holy Ghost produces in the Church, then we have heresy. In Moehler's theology,

therefore, heresy is a result of a waning in charity, not of an error of the mind. Father Baum notes that "the heretic is one who, severing the bonds of love with the community, refuses to let his vital possession of Christianity be constantly influenced, modified, and reconciled by the life of the whole Church. And because he excludes himself from the community of the Spirit, the contrasting current he emphasized before within total Christianity suddenly becomes for him a contradiction, a source of error and isolation, irreconcilable with the Church." Father Baum then ventures "to propose that schisms and heresies have often been reactions to certain faults in the Church. A tendency which might have remained a healthy contrast is exaggerated and deformed, because a blameworthy situation in the Church provoked men of little charity. Heresy often is a truth pulled out of its context, an insight into the gospel detached from the whole of the gospel." This, Father Baum suggests, is what must have happened at the Reformation. It was a longing for gospel simplicity that had inspired the reformers who finally broke away from the Church; "but because they lacked the guidance of the Church, their movement swerved from the gospel, became partially involved in error, and stirred up political forces in opposition to the true Church of Christ."

Before finally trying to introduce us to "the faces of Protestantism", Father Baum discusses the form that our dialogue with non-Catholic Christians should take. First he points out the two dangers of the polemical approach, which has been the method generally practiced by the Church since the Reformation. The first danger is that its orientation—that of reading through the opponents' writings to detect errors, not to comprehend what they are saying—prevents us from understanding their position in the proper context. The second is that it tends to tempt us to sin against truth and charity. Father Baum then indicates that the method of ecumenism is fundamentally more realistic and indeed more truly charitable. It refuses to listen in order to refute merely; rather, it tries "to penetrate, to grasp the inspiration and the vision of the whole" doctrine before it. The ecumenist intends primarily

to search, understand and appreciate the "valid aspirations in and behind Protestantism." Already, according to Father Baum, certain effects of the new method are evident. "Without any compromise, without any wishy-washiness, we have come closer to one another. . . . Many Protestant Churches have been led back to greater orthodoxy and a more traditional understanding of the gospel of Christ, and the Catholic Church herself has discovered a more balanced possession of all her gifts and a more impartial expression of her wisdom."

According to Father Baum, there are four "currents within the Protestant tradition, which in various proportions and different intensities make up the Protestant world." The first is what he calls "orthodox Protestantism", that theological outlook created by the original Reformers, Luther and Calvin. The second is that area of Protestantism which Father Baum briefly describes as the Anglican world. The third is Protestant Liberalism which, according to Father Baum, "began in the last century in Germany, when a number of important spiritual leaders detached themselves from the historic creeds of the Christian Church and defined religion in terms of personal experience." The fourth is the sectarian movement which opposed all organized Churches, Protestant as well as Catholic. The Protestant ecumenical movement, Father Baum writes, owes its existence mainly to Anglicanism and to liberal Christianity.

If ecumenism then is to determine the Catholic attitude toward non-Catholic Christians, will it eventually cancel out the Catholic mission to convert separated Christians? "Unbelievers," after all, "must be converted to the wisdom of the gospel, and dissident Christians to the fullness of wisdom in the Church." Father Baum draws his answer to this problem from the notion of religious liberty which is itself based on the nature of man as announced in the Bible and on the character of the Christian faith proclaimed in the gospel. Father Baum states that "while we agree with many that error has certainly no rights before God, we believe that the person erring in religion has many rights before the human community and the Christian Church. The erring person outside the Church must

be treated in such a way that his Christian conscience remains free to follow the holy destiny God has bestowed on him." Indeed among the primary rights and responsibilities of the Christian, Catholic as well as Protestant, one is that of being a public witness to Christianity. "The Protestant Christian in good faith would sin," according to Father Baum, "if he failed to give witness. Despite the errors mixed in his creed, he is objectively obliged to testify to his commitment to Christ." Consequently, if we grant and advocate religious liberty, we cannot but recognize the Christian's liberty to announce his convictions in public and to seek conversions. In order to safeguard ecumenism and at the same time to prevent the downgrading of conversion work, Father Baum incorporates into his text the distinctions between "authentic Christian witness" and the corruption of this witness, which was made in a report of the World Council of Churches on religious liberty. According to the report, "witness is corrupted when cajolery, bribery, undue pressure or intimidation is used—subtly or openly—to bring about seeming conversion; when we put the success of our Church before the honour of Christ; when we commit the dishonesty of comparing the ideal of our own Church with the actual achievement of another; when we seek to advance our own cause by bearing false witness against another Church; when personal or corporate self-seeking replaces love for every individual soul with whom we are concerned." Father Baum writes then that "if all Christians, including ourselves, were to take this distinction seriously, in other words, if all of us were to fight this temptation as a great evil, ecumenism and evangelization would not be in conflict." He, however, emphasizes, and rightly so, the fact that conversion work is not the answer to the problem of Christian disunity. The Church has always recognized this, and, according to Father Baum, "when faced with bodies of separated Christians, [she] has always preferred to deal with the problem collectively."

The concluding section of Father Baum's chapter on ecumenism and conversion work is of special interest because in it he indicates how the ecumenical spirit succeeds in drawing

out the essential charity of conversion work. Often, he says, a new convert to Catholicism is "overwhelmed by what appears to him to be, but is not, ecclesiastical authority. As a result the unfolding of his creative and spiritual powers promised to him in the Church never really takes place." Life before and life after conversion seem so radically different that conversion isolates him, in many instances unnecessarily, from his family and many friends, "not because they reject him, but because he has been led to give up the continuity with his life before he was converted." Ecumenism, on the other hand, while integrating the convert into the mystical fellowship of the Catholic Church, reveals to him and to his family and friends that his conversion is a fruition rather than a dislocation of his pre-Catholic life. "Converts [thus] become bridges and links to their former communities. Separated Christians would be able to see the convert as one of their own, as one who has remained loyal to their Christian ideals and yet as one who has received an immensely richer treasure in the Catholic Church."

Though, strictly speaking, the ecumenical dialogue does not extend to the Jews, an invitation for them to join in it would not be inappropriate. If Christianity is "rooted in the people of the Old Law," if "biblical concepts and sacramental symbols come to us from the Jewish people," and if indeed the "Church proclaims herself to be the messianic fulfillment and authentic heir of ancient Israel," the wisdom of asking Jews to join in "ecumenical conversations between Christian churches" seems unassailable. Protestant as well as Catholic scripture scholars have very vividly revealed that the full intelligibility of the New Testament can be made accessible to us only with the help of studies in the Old Testament. "Even questions such as the unity and holiness of the Church," according to Father Baum, "can be deepened by studying God's ways with the Israel of old."

To a country such as the Philippines, for which Catholicism has become so much a part of an ancient tradition that, like many other elements of tradition, it seems to have lost much of its vitality and not a little of its genuine meaning,

the usefulness of Father Baum's book could be beyond measure. For a people to whom Catholicism has been so close that it has been lost sight of, *Progress and Perspectives* affords an opportunity to wake up once again to an awareness of what membership in Christ's Church signifies. It focusses our attention on the essentials of Catholic life and worship even as it opens up our minds and hearts to the faith and charity of non-Catholic Christendom. To the non-Catholic Christian, whom Father Baum addresses but indirectly, this book offers an insight into the bases and methods of the Catholic quest for unity. It points out to the non-Catholic Christian that, rather than seek "to accomodate Catholic doctrine to suit the theological preference of dissident Christians. . . the aim of Catholic ecumenical theology is. . . to uncover the enormous riches of the Catholic tradition in order to show that the true Christian elements found among Protestants exist in the Church, and will find their fulfillment in the Church." Above all, the value of Father Baum's work lies in that it emphasizes the need of Christians to converse among themselves in the genuine charity of the Spirit, which is the life of Christ's Church.

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