

TWO ECUMENICAL PIONEERS

We meet today to remember the work of a great ecumenical pioneer, the Abbé Paul Couturier, who lived from 1881-1953, but whose witness has been strangely neglected over the last generation¹. He emphasised, above all, the primacy of spiritual ecumenism. Over the last generation, attention has focused on unity schemes, many of them, sadly, abortive, upon local ecumenical partnerships, important and sometimes impressive but tending also in some circumstances to be rather isolated from the wider life of the Church, and upon ecumenical dialogues, necessary and often fruitful in insights, yet also rather imperfectly received within the wider life of the Church.

The papal encyclical *Ut Unum Sint* re-emphasised some of the key stresses of the Abbé Paul on spiritual ecumenism². None of his truths have been denied, but the full richness of his teaching has been rather overlooked. In the opinion of many of us it now needs to be re-received by all the partner traditions in the ecumenical quest.

I want today to examine anew the legacy of the Abbé Paul and to do so in dialogue with the work of an earlier pioneer Methodist ecumenist, the Rev. William James Shrewsbury (1795-1866). Shrewsbury is now almost totally forgotten even within the British Methodist Connexion. However, his proto-ecumenical insights complement and reinforce those of the Abbé Paul³. For both men, ecumenism was intimately and necessarily related to the work of sanctification, individual and corporate. The Abbé Paul talked frequently of the necessity of 'spiritual emulation', of the need for the churches to co-operate in the search for holiness and help each other on⁴. Shrewsbury believed profoundly in the zeal for holiness within each denomination as the remedy for division. He said,

'it is by promoting holiness within its own limits, that each church may most effectively benefit other churches; for the living example of a holy Christian community is the most powerful check to evil, and the strongest incentive to virtue that can possibly be given. This is the Scriptural way to 'provoke to love and to good works' (Heb. 10, 24)⁵.

Both men stressed the necessity for profound humility on the part of their respective churches as they faced the distortions of their own history and the witness of important values preserved by others. Neither man was an ecumenist or ecumenical theologian in the current sense. Such people did not, of course, exist in Shrewsbury's lifetime and only began to emerge towards the end of the Abbé's. Both men were rather ordinarily conservative presbyters of the Church, extraordinary only in their sensitivity to the call to visible unity and the spiritual depth with which they

¹ The standard biography, in English, of the Abbé, is Curtis, G, *Paul Couturier and Unity in Christ*, London, SCM, 1964.

² *Ut Unum Sint*, paras 15-17 and 21-27.

³ See *Memorials of the Rev. William James Shrewsbury* by his son, John V. B. Shrewsbury, London, 1866. See also my article 'The Ecumenical Principles of William James Shrewsbury', *One in Christ*, 2000, no 4, pp. 365-377.

⁴ For some relevant texts, see *Oecumenisme Spirituel. Les écrits de l'abbé Paul Couturier. Présentation et commentaire de Maurice Villain*, Paris, 1963, pp. 112-117.

⁵ Shrewsbury, W.J. *An Essay of the Scriptural Nature of the Wesleyan Economy*, London, 1840, p.144.

explored its implications for the Christian life. Both came to an ecumenical vocation through crises that impinged on the middle years of their ministries. Couturier was a priest-schoolmaster in Lyons, a very conservative priest, who suddenly found himself confronted with the task of looking after newly arrived refugees from the Russian Revolution. From that, he was led to explore their spiritual heritage⁶. Shrewsbury had been a distinguished missionary in the West Indies and in South Africa. Returning to the 'home' work in 1839, he encountered the dual crisis with which British Wesleyan Methodism was then faced. On the one hand, there was the internal criticism of those who attacked its polity and particularly its ministry; on the other the attack on Wesleyan Methodism by the fathers of the Oxford Movement, who denied its truly ecclesial status and the attacks of the 'old' dissenters who attacked its ecclesiology from an 'independent' standpoint. Shrewsbury came, as did many of his eminent Wesleyan contemporaries, to the defence of his Church, but he did so in a way that was different. They defended the scriptural legitimacy of Methodism as a *typos* of the Christian faith, accompanying this with exposure of the lacunae of other churches⁷. Shrewsbury eschewed the later temptation, choosing rather always to point Methodists towards the most positive possible appreciation of others. In an age of generally bitter inter-ecclesial conflict, the flavour of Shrewsbury's thought can be caught from the following quotation.

'It is the ordinary practice of men to pass by the excellencies of those whom they count opponents, and to fix only on their defects, or their weaker points, for the sake of gaining an advantage, a triumph, a victory; and this way of the world has been too often imitated in the Churches of God, and even by ministers of the sanctuary'. He goes on to argue that this is not the way for Wesleyans. It becomes them 'everywhere to rejoice in the truth', and, 'wherever they meet with it in our common Protestant churches, to honour it and to observe its silent and gradual working with gladness of heart; and it should be their joy to take every fit occasion of speaking of whatever will give the most favourable impression, consistently with truth, of every Christian community, and all Christian ministers, without excepting those who, it is known beforehand, will only reward such generosity with envy and scorn'⁸.

Both Couturier and Shrewsbury recognised the force of communal pride in bolstering the self-esteem of the separated churches. They recognised that this work of the flesh, a cancer as it were at the heart of ecclesial life, could only be countered by the most extreme and Spirit led humility. Very similar to the quotation just given from Shrewsbury are some remarks of the Abbé's:

'if there is an attitude in contradiction to that of 'spiritual emulation', it is assuredly that disposition that traps us into dwelling upon the human deficiencies of Christian communities other than our own. It is a tendency that arises when our identity is merged with that of a group, which thus becomes for us a sort of extension of our own identity'⁹.

Couturier points to the importance, for Catholics, of a kenotic self-divestment of all such attitudes. He had absolutely no doubt that the (Roman) Catholic Church had

⁶ Curtis, op cit, p. 40.

⁷ James Rigg (1821-1909), in particular, took this rather triumphalist approach.

⁸ Shrewsbury, *Essay*, op cit, p. 291.

⁹ Couturier, cited in Villain, op cit, p. 123.

alone preserved all the fullness of the faith and the structures necessary to the full and integral communion of the whole, but it was precisely this fact that made him call for a deeply penitent humility on the part of Catholics in the presence of their Orthodox, Anglican and Protestant brethren. He said,

'It is for this reason that the true Catholic suffers, in the very inner depths of his soul. He grieves intensely at the very thought of everything that conceals from his Christian brothers and unbelievers alike, the true face of the Church'¹⁰.

I may add that this insight of his is still held by some of the faithful in his own church. When staying at the Convent of the Benedictines of Montmartre, I was told by one of the lay workers there that the disunity of the Church was 'une grande souffrance', a great cause of anguish to her.

Couturier argued that Catholics had to rise above their limited horizons. They had to accept that the fact of division had deprived the Roman Catholic Church of valid elements of a rounded Christian faith and practice that were better preserved in certain other communions. He spoke of the 'biblical and Christocentric spirituality of the Protestants', of 'the cosmic and eschatological sense' of the Orthodox. He warned Catholics that they could not expect reunion until the valid insights of Protestants, Anglicans and Orthodox had been re-received by the Roman Church. The Church had to recognise that it was not limited to those cultural and thought forms that had, to date, been the vehicles of the 'inculturation' of the faith. There could be a Kantian, a Platonist, a Bergsonian synthesis of the faith. Anticipating even the teaching of Vatican II about other religions, he even held that the time would come for the assimilation of valid insights from Hindu culture¹¹.

Shrewsbury did not, of course, make unique claims for Methodism analagous to those that loyalty to his own ecclesiology compelled the Abbé to make. He did, however, stress the Wesleyan virtue of 'disinterestedness' by which he meant an openness, a humility to receive whatever gifts the Lord wished to give the Methodist people through others¹². It also implied a desire to see the Christian faith spread by whatever means and by whatever church. Shrewsbury counted it a great sign of such disinterestedness that many Methodists eagerly supported, both financially and by prayer the overseas missionary efforts of other denominations as well as their own. His concept of 'disinterestedness' also influenced his particular stance on relations with the contemporary Church of England. Already many Methodists, as well as almost all the 'old' dissenters opposed its privileged 'establishment status'. Shrewsbury, in common with the Wesleyan leaders of his time, refused to be drawn into the contemporary political agitation against establishment. In his case, it was not just because he saw it as a diversion from the immediate evangelistic task of Methodism, but because he believed that the Establishment must be judged strictly on its merits for fostering the faith. If it enabled, as it did, the presence of one denomination in every corner of the land, a commitment that could not be equalled by the others, then surely it had its merits. Shrewsbury was also utterly opposed to any attitude of jealousy by other churches towards the Church of England or any arrogance by her towards her sister churches. He expressed it thus,

¹⁰ *ibid*, p.123.

¹¹ *ibid*, p.120.

¹² Shrewsbury, *Essay*, op cit, pp. 288-291.

'Let then none envy the dominant church, her superiority, or her privileges; and let not that church be arrogant or lordly in her carriage towards other Churches; but let all combine in their several spheres, and in union as often as they can, to promote 'glory to God in the highest, and, on earth, peace, goodwill towards men'¹³.

Shrewsbury also argued that it was not unreasonable for one Church, for historical reasons, to enjoy a generally recognised pre-eminence. 'Moreover, as in the days of the ancient glory of the Jewish Church, when Israel dwelt in the land of promise, there was an *unenvied pre-eminence* allotted to the tribe of Judah, so, in the providential arrangements of the several branches of the Christian family, we are willing to allow that there is a *distinguishing honour* due to that section of the Church that is normally denominated the Establishment of this country'¹⁴.

I believe that this principle is now capable of reception on an international, and not purely a national level. Orthodox and Protestants could come to recognise a special pre-eminence in the Church of Rome, a church so strong in global mission and so fertile in the development of many spiritualities across the ages and continents, a church increasingly the leader in the Ecumenical Movement, a church that, at Vatican II, affirmed the insights of Couturier into the permanent validity of the spiritual values treasured by Orthodox and Protestants, a church that is perhaps uniquely capable of safeguarding and treasuring for the *catholica*, the many and diverse riches of all the local churches and *typoi* of church life within Christendom.

Both Couturier and Shrewsbury were particularly anxious that their churches receive from others in order to grow into that balanced fullness of life that they desired for them. Couturier has a striking passage on the importance of reading the Bible, a practice in those far away pre-Vatican II days still neglected by many Catholics.

'When Catholics read the Bible again, they will discover a common source with their Anglican and Protestant brethren. They will be plunged into the same life giving stream to the very depths of their consciousness.. Their thoughts, feelings, judgements, their entire spiritual life will converge with those of their Anglican and Protestant brothers. Then, we will be able to understand each other'¹⁵.

Shrewsbury was aware that Methodism, as the most recently developed of the great Christian communions, was indebted to many, the high church Caroline divines, the Puritans and the continental pietists, particularly the Moravians. 'Thus it appears that the Methodists have good reason to be the friends of all and the enemies of none, for they are really debtors to all, and more than they can ever repay to the all the chief Protestant churches now existing in the world'¹⁶. It will be noted that Shrewsbury does not mention the Roman Catholics or Orthodox. Of the latter, he was probably scarcely aware; of the former, he had only the book knowledge of contemporary Protestant propagandists and not the live experience that might have made a man of his sensitivity renounce such stereotypes. But within his limitations, Shrewsbury treasured the possibility of a real ecumenical role for Methodism. He

¹³ *ibid*, pp. 142-3.

¹⁴ *ibid*, pp. 99-100.

¹⁵ cited in Villain, *op cit*, p. 186.

¹⁶ Shrewsbury, *Essay*, *op cit*, pp. 89-90.

coveted for it the role of 'middle bond of the union' that he hoped would eventually come between the Church of England, the 'old' dissenters and the Wesleyans. He hoped that the Wesleyan would always treasure their joint heritage in worship, with its combination of liturgical traditions, derived from the Book of Common Prayer, and the extempore tradition of the old Puritans and the contemporary Congregationalists and Baptists. Shrewsbury was impatient with those in his own church who deprecated liturgical worship as somehow less spiritual than extempore prayer. He devoted the last chapter of his magnum opus to an exposition of the rite of Morning Prayer from the Book of Common Prayer, a rite still then used in many large Wesleyan churches. He extolled it as a distillation of the combined wisdom of the Fathers of the Early Church and the Reformers¹⁷.

Both Couturier and Shrewsbury saw an intimate connection between the search for holiness and the search for unity. In this they were guided by an ecclesial vision of true catholicity as genuinely comprehensive and all-embracing, but not, of course, doctrinally indifferent or spiritually lax. Couturier particularly emphasised the importance of prayer and the way in which all true prayer is the prayer of the Risen Christ in his members, inspired in them by the guidance of the Holy Spirit. He emphasised the way in which the sanctification of each currently separated community within the Church could be aided by the prayer of the others; thus he wanted Catholics to pray for the sanctification of their Anglican, Protestant and Orthodox brethren while encouraging the latter to pray for the sanctification of Catholics. He was aware of how far his own church and all others had to grow in holiness before the prayer of Christ in them could reach its fulfilment. He said

'For the present, neither Catholicism, nor any other group of Christians is 'ripe' for corporate reunion'¹⁸. As an aside, one may add that this is still, sadly, probably the case. Whilst there is far more mutual ecumenical knowledge than obtained in the pioneering days of Couturier, let alone Shrewsbury, whilst there are some signally creative successes within the Local Ecumenical Partnerships and local 'churches together' in Britain, there is still at many levels shocking mutual ignorance and even prejudice. One has only to read the correspondence columns of the Methodist Recorder to find examples of this from people who often have totally outdated views of other churches.

Couturier went to the heart of the matter in the following penetrating and beautiful passage.

'How can we love the one Christ without loving his very historic and mystical extension in His own Church?...How can we love as brothers (and sisters) in Christ all those marked by His baptism without suffering as we admit that the family of the baptised is a broken one?... Love, however, will lead us along the same trajectory of thought, respecting however, 'the diversity of spirits'. Departing from the 'I', she will form the 'we'... She cannot, in virtue of her very nature be other than the creator of a *single* Christian group'¹⁹.

¹⁷ *ibid*, pp. 88, 146-7, pp. 310 ff.

¹⁸ cited in Villain, *op cit*, p. 122.

¹⁹ *ibid*, p. 119.

Echoing the majestic spiritual ecclesiology of his distinguished Catholic predecessor (and contemporary of Shrewsbury) Mohler, Couturier argues that if the Church had been incarnated in sufficiently holy and loving people (he uses the almost untranslatable expression 'suffisamment diaphanes' with its implication of transparency to grace), schism would never have occurred. The Holy Spirit would have been able to incline all hearts to mutual love, and to give the gift of mutual comprehension to those of very different spiritual temperament and formation, thus allowing true diversity to flourish in the Church without schism²⁰. Couturier then argues that to attain to unity it is first essential for all Christians to enter into a process of 'spiritual emulation' in which they share in the process of ever deeper and more humble prayer and penitence, leading to an ever deeper spiritual life. This convergence in true prayer will lead to closer unity²¹.

Couturier is quite clear that a parallel deepening of the spiritual life in all branches of the Church is the necessary preliminary to effective theological work for unity. It will 'render fruitful' the work of the theologians. He adds that, as far as the human element in ecumenism is concerned, it will be 'less the work of the theologians than of people of prayer'. In turn, the work of the theologians will only be affective to the degree that it is true theology soaked in an atmosphere of prayer. Couturier insists that work for unity must begin and end in prayer. In 1937, he wrote, 'the time for the work of the theologians and the hierarchies has not yet come. What has come and is a matter of urgency is the work of psychological purification by prayer, by goodness, by reciprocal appreciation on the part of individuals in terms of all their values human and Christian- all the tender fruits of charity'²². In 1944, he opined, 'Visible Christian unity will be attained when the praying Christ has found enough Christian souls of all communions for him to pray freely in them to His Father for unity'²³.

For Couturier, an understanding of the praying communion of saints was at the centre of true ecclesiology.

'Into my poor prayer, then, runs like lifeblood the prayer of others...Let every Christian be aware of this great flood of prayer...In exchange my prayer enters into the prayer of all men. And if the beloved brother who launches my prayer towards the Holy Trinity lives more intensely the life of the Trinity than I, then through him, even though he may be unknown to me, my poor prayer will make a more rapid flight to the Eternal and have greater efficacy in the presence of God...At the choir office, at the breviary prayed alone, in silent prayer, my Protestant, Anglican and Orthodox brethren pray with me and in me in my prayer'²⁴.

His vision of the reunited Church is almost an inspired commentary on the words of St John, 'Brothers and sisters, we do not know what we shall be like, but we know that when he appears, we shall be like Him' (1 John, 3 v.2) . He writes,

²⁰ *ibid*, p. 112.

²¹ *ibid*, p. 123. He argues that prayer for other communions is 'particularly powerful'.

²² cited in Curtis, *op cit*, p. 83.

²³ *ibid*, p. 345.

²⁴ *ibid*, p. 340-1.

'The consummation of unity will reveal the Church truly as the Body of Christ. We cannot even imagine what it will be like except that we can be certain that the recovered glory will surpass anything from the past.. It is very certain that the Church will then differ greatly from anything that characterised any of the earlier Christian groupings. The Spirit of unity will radiate throughout the whole without any hindrance. The participants in the diverse cultures (within the Church), previously separated by the boundaries of the separated communities, will mutually recognise that their respective geniuses are complementary, not opposed to each other. Thank to the total convergence of all in humility, prayer and penitence, Wisdom will have achieved the first stage of her work, the reunion of all Christians in one visible unity. Then, from all cultural backgrounds, innumerable possibilities for expressing the Christian life will have been placed back in the hands of the Bride of Christ. Fortified by these jewels, she will be able to express better than ever the infinite splendour of the incarnate Word'²⁵.

Shrewsbury also had his vision of the harmony that could and should prevail within a truly united Church. He emphasised the importance of true harmony between the ministers and people of the Church, lack of which he deemed the greatest misfortune that could befall any church. He was grieved by the growing mistrust that he saw within the Wesleyan Methodism of his day and did his best to defuse it by concurrently emphasising both the divinely appointed authority of the ministry alongside the *equal* necessity of lay agency, such as already existed within Methodism, in the spread of the Gospel and the building up of the people of God. In a manner that, to an extent, mirrors the current Roman Catholic understanding of the necessary 'conspiratio' or 'co-working' of the hierarchy and the people of God, of magisterium and 'sensus fidelium', Shrewsbury asserted, 'in the carrying out of that work (ie. of evangelisation and edification)an universal instrumentality of all the faithful was to be employed'²⁶.

Couturier provides a complement to this insight, when, in stressing the value of a common rereading of Scripture, he argues that it will help all Christians recognise, via mediation upon the special vocations of the prophets, the apostles and the Mother of God, the importance of the unique vocation of *each* Christian. 'Does not every creature, even the very simplest, have its mystery, hidden in the total mystery of Christ' ²⁷?

Shrewsbury expressed his ultimate vision of unity in a very Wesleyan way, with the quotation of two verses from Charles Wesley.

'Happy Day of union sweet!
O when shall it appear!
When shall all thy People meet,
In unity sincere!
Tear each others' flesh no more,
But kindly think and speak the same;
All express the meekening power
And spirit of the Lamb.

²⁵ citations from Villain, op cit, pp. 52, 201.

²⁶ Shrewsbury, Essay, op cit, pp. 54, 225-6, 230, 232.

²⁷ cited in Villain, op cit, p. 186.

Visit us, bright morning star,
 And bring the perfect day!
 Urged by faith's incessant power,
 No longer Lord delay:
 Now destroy the envious root,
 The ground of nature's feuds remove;
 Fill the earth with golden fruit,
 With ripe millennial love.²⁸

Having completed this brief survey, what lessons can we derive for present day ecumenism from the complementary visions and teaching of Shrewsbury and the Abbé Paul?

Firstly, the insight that living the corporately ecumenical life of seeking churchly reconciliation demands exactly the same virtues and graces as the living of the individual Christian life of loving our neighbours. In both cases, it is necessary to show patience and meekness and never to return evil for evil; rather always to do good even to our enemies, as Shrewsbury put it never to fail to recognise the good in others even when they are not prepared to reciprocate and may only reply in scorn. Couturier stressed the importance, for Catholics, of taking the first steps towards reconciliation. His Litany of 1939 shows the depth of repentance that he expected Catholics to show. I cite just two petitions,

'For our controversies sometimes full of irony, of narrowness of spirit or of exaggeration with regard to our non-Catholic Christian brethren, for our intransigence and our severe judgements, Forgive us, O Lord²⁹.

'For all acts of culpable violence wrought by us Catholics against our Protestant brethren, *Forgive us, O Lord.*

It never ceases to surprise me that one can meet Christians who display admirably humble and forgiving qualities in their relationships with other individuals, yet who still speak, on occasion, in a prejudiced, ignorant and dismissive manner of other Christian churches. Yet surely we cannot treat churches other than as we are called to treat individual Christians, and, indeed, non-Christians?

Secondly, the emphasis that is so strong in Couturier upon prayer and spiritual emulation. It reminds us that the search for unity is not to be detached from the renewal and the fulfilment of the Church in the context of the totality of God's plan for creation. We are to become people of prayer and we are to help others to grow in prayerfulness in order that Christ may work in us as He truly wishes to work, 'that he world might believe'. We need to be transparent to his grace so that others may see that grace shining through us and credibility be lent to the Gospel. In true prayer we grow in that self-transcendence ('dépassement') and that self-divestment ('depouillement') to which Couturier calls us which are the equivalent of the 'disinterestedness' commended by Shrewsbury³⁰. We are called to what Jean-

²⁸ cited in Shrewsbury, *Essay*, pp. 85-6.

²⁹ cited in Curtis, *op cit*, p. 107.

³⁰ Curtis, Shrewsbury, *Essay op cit*, pp. 288-291.

Marie Tillard has called 'collective conversion to the Apostolic Tradition', that is to a search for the authenticity of the Christian tradition both in the original deposit of faith and its legitimate development wherever it may be found, whether it be in our communion or in another. We are called to a holiness that is concerned *only* with the glory of God and His will and truth and is in no way concerned with denominational self-justification or 'amour propre'.

Finally, we are called to a new vision of what the Church can be, a church in which every culture and every valid expression of Christian truth and life has its place; every individual Christian has his or her place, heartily content that in fulfilling their allotted role, they are duly esteemed by Christ and all His people. It is 'a church that never ceases to meditate upon the word of God until all His promises are fulfilled in her' (Dei Verbum, 8). It is a church in which truths and insights previously thought to be antagonistic can now be restated as legitimate and mutually receivable forms of what the Lutheran-Roman Catholic Joint Declaration on Justification calls 'differentiated consensus'. It is interesting to note the extent to which both Couturier and Shrewsbury anticipated much that is said to day about the legitimacy of unity in mutually enriching diversity. Neither man knew, let alone used the phrase, but with the sure instinct of the true charism of discernment, they effectively commended it.

If I may make a transposition into the Wesleyan mode of thinking, it will become the church of recognition, reception and connexion³¹. It will be the Church that is always glad to recognise the signs of the work of the Spirit wherever they are discerned and even when they are discerned under forms that may appear novel and unprecedented. Like Peter, it will 'not withstand God (Acts 11), but will gladly receive the new situations opened up by the Spirit.

It will be a church of reception, receiving such Christians and communities as it has, in its turn, first been received by Christ. It will receive in line with its own commitment to constant conversion to the apostolic Tradition and renewal by the Spirit.

Lastly, it will be a church that seeks to extend the bonds of connexion to ensure that its structures enable the 'fullest possible circulation of love' and insight both across and within the churches of today and in their reception of treasures from the churches of the past. The current ecumenical ecclesiological debate is vital to the future of the Ecumenical Movement, precisely from the standpoint of asking what each tradition needs to *receive* from others in order that it may more fully live the apostolicity of the one holy Church and *contribute* from the richness of its own particular, providential heritage to the catholicity of the whole. For some churches, true ecclesiological development towards fuller catholicity and apostolicity may involve receiving ministries it has previously lacked, such as the episcopate or the Petrine ministry; for others, it may involve reform in the exercise of existing ministries or conciliar forms in such a way that the proper dignity and right of local churches to their own customs is enhanced and safeguarded and the prophetic voice of the laity is heard in council alongside of the 'apostolic' voice of the ministry. In both cases, it will not be a matter of renunciation of the past, but of a greater fulfilment, a true exchange of gifts under the guidance of the Spirit, a going on 'hand in hand to our high calling's glorious hope' (Charles Wesley). It is as pilgrim Church that all the local

³¹ See my 'Some Methodist principles of Ecumenism' in *Epworth Review*, 1997, pp. 53-68.

and particular (denominational) churches go on towards the final goal of the total convergence of all the people of God in his Kingdom (Matthew, 8,11).

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