

# Ecumenism

by Father Daniel Callam, C.S.B.

**E**CUMENISM can be defined as a friendly dialogue among Christians. In the old days, such discussions, if they occurred at all, were concerned with pointing out the errors of the opposite party. Protestants were critical of Catholic ignorance of Scripture, while Catholics harped on the tendency of Protestantism to fracture into multiple sects. The first step in overcoming this relational dead end was to focus on what we have in common, with heartening results. We discovered, each in his own way, that it is possible to learn something from other Christians. The renewed interest of us Catholics in Scripture, for instance, owes a lot to the prodding of our Protestant interlocutors, and a growing sensitivity to a sacramental spirituality seems to have come to them from us. Progress towards union has slowed down, however, because Christians of all stripes have discovered that there are serious differences among us that cannot be overcome by good feeling alone. I have noticed a certain narrowing in scope in current forms of inter-Christian dialogue, a tendency to focus attention on those groups that share some of one's own religious convictions.

There is nothing surprising in this phenomenon. Some degree of sympathy is indispensable for the valid assessment of anything. We rightly expect sports announcers to like the game they are reporting, political analysts to have an ideological commitment of some sort, be it to capitalism or distributism, and critics to enjoy art, music or theatre. Newspapers might become more interesting if the music critic were tone deaf, political commentators were anarchists, or I were to write the sports column, but surely accuracy and objectivity would be decreased rather than enhanced.

Under repeated exhortations to be ecumenical I, too, have developed a friendly interest in my fellow Christians, and, like everyone else, I have my favourites. The separated brethren I like to hobnob with have a firm allegiance to revelation, a strong belief in the uniqueness of Christianity, and an unshakeable conviction that one church is not as good as another. My soul mates, consequently are found among the Orthodox and Evangelical Protestants. One thing we share is a contempt for the bland relativist who always clinches his argument by saying, "Well anyway, we're all going to the same place. . . ." I wonder how many are aware that they are espousing a view found in the *Memorial* of the Roman Symmachus who in A.D. 384 pleaded the cause of paganism before the Christian Emperor Valentinian II:

We ask, then for peace for the gods of our fathers and of our country. It is just that all worships should be considered as one. We look on the same stars, the sky is common, the same world surrounds us. What difference does it make by what pains each seeks the truth? We cannot attain to so great a secret by one road.

The effect of such thinking is to reduce religion to *man's* search for the transcendent. Where is "God Himself, alive, pulling at the other end of the cord, perhaps approaching

at infinite speed, the hunter, king, husband?”<sup>1</sup> The last thing people who dabble in religion want is to find God—or rather to be found by him. Flannery O’Connor describes what happens when the hound of heaven closes in:

. . . noticing that it was dark, he began to run. He ran faster and faster, and as he turned up the road to his house, his heart was running as fast as his legs, and he was certain that Something Awful was tearing behind him with its arms rigid and its fingers ready to clutch.<sup>2</sup>

Let us hearken, therefore, to the distinguished Orthodox theologian, John Meyendorff:

From the Orthodox point of view, Christian ecumenism cannot mean a search for unity at any price on the basis of a minimum common denominator. It is the *fullness of truth* that will unite Christians, for Christ is fullness and he can never abandon his Church. . . . The Son of God made himself *visible* in the course of history, he became man and founded on earth a *visible* communion which was to possess sacramentally the fulness of his redemptive grace. . . . The Protestant conception of the unity and fullness of the Church as either something of a invisible nature or belonging to an eschatological future seems, to Orthodox Christians, to amount to a denial of the reality of salvation, as a repudiation of that which God himself has given us.<sup>3</sup>

As for the Evangelicals, it is well known that they are at once deeply committed to Christian doctrine . . . and deeply suspicious of the Church. I particularly enjoy these remarks from *Cults and Isms: Twenty Alternatives to Evangelical Christianity* by Russell P. Spittler. One of the “Isms” is Catholicism:

Roman Catholicism is surprisingly orthodox: they accept and defend such basic doctrines as the deity of Christ, His literal resurrection, the Holy Trinity—and others. . . . The truth essential to salvation is available in Roman Catholicism, though that kernel is encrusted with many centuries of dogmatic additions and ritualistic practices. God is able, however, to find people of “every nation,” as Peter had to learn of the Gentiles (Acts 10:35).

Father Meyendorff and Mr. Spittler (despite his condescending “surprisingly”) are in fundamental accord with Catholicism in their assertion that revelation is something given, not appropriated. This is the principle that recognizes the eternal Word of God in Jesus Christ; only with him, in him, and through him will Christians be one in the fulness of truth. ☞

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<sup>1</sup> C.S. Lewis, *Miracles*.

<sup>2</sup> “The Turkey”

<sup>3</sup> *The Orthodox Church*