

The Poorer Means

Thomas Merton

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I

There is no need to regret that a movement, providential in our day, is also suddenly fashionable. That Christians should be so openly and so actively concerned over Unity after four centuries of struggle, suspicion, bitterness and intransigence, is without doubt a relief to everyone—a relief that can fittingly be celebrated by meetings and dialogues, with full publicity and exhaustive comment.

True, the popular press is always sweeping and superficial. It may tend to give a more triumphant evaluation of the advance toward Unity than is really justified. It tends to ignore the seriousness of obstacles that may remain confronting us for a long time. Yet there is a general feeling that we can now freely admit something that we have secretly desired all along but did not dare to desire openly lest we invite humiliation, rebuff and loss of face.

There is a general and well-founded sense that the Churches are no longer adversaries. At least this much has been achieved, and almost miraculously achieved. So it is right that there be meetings, that the highest dignitaries should embrace one another without hypocrisy, that this should be seen and known, and that many should be moved by it to love one another where before they only feared and distrusted, perhaps despised, one another.

In a word, there has been an admission, a confession, of sin—the sin of division, for which all sides have been to blame. We see, with shame and sorrow, to what extent our forefathers allowed themselves to be

blinded by a “noontday devil” of intolerance and self-righteousness. We begin to be aware of what great harm this division has done to the Gospel in the vast continents that did not know Christ. So it is right that now the sin be meditated by theologians and by whole Churches, and that the slow, painful work of healing and expiation be begun.

If this is celebrated in the press, and if now “the thing to do” is to engage in dialogue with someone, and if gestures of friendship are multiplied, very well. They can be both public and sincere. And they must certainly be public, for this has been a public sin, a universal scandal. It is Christ whom we have torn with our petty refusals, our standing upon our dignity, our institutional arrogance, our relentless and intransigent demands.

And yet, there are serious differences which must remain, and problems that have no apparent solution. There are on all sides values and truths that cannot be abandoned. They perpetuate division and difference, and yet to abandon them would also be an infidelity to truth and to that call to higher Unity, the way to which is still completely hidden and obscure.

For we cannot build true Unity on a casual indifference to essential values.

So, while there must indeed be displayed the splendor of large, visible and successful methods, we must remember that these will not do all the work that has to be done. It is a work not of negotiation only, not of discussion, diplomacy and theology, but above all of sacrifice, suffering, expiation, prayer.

Let us then remember that the most important of all the means to Unity remain the poorer means, the hidden means, the ones which are accessible to all; and most of all perhaps to those without special talent, office or mission. There is a greater mission, the mission of all, to pray and offer sacrifice, perhaps in total obscurity, the left hand not knowing what the right is doing.

II

The poorer means are those which, first of all, seldom or never have any clearly visible result.

They are, in fact, quite often the invisible counterpart of the visible and “splendid” means which are acclaimed and wondered at. For while the bishops and theologians have their mission to speak and make declarations, to say where the ecumenical movement is going—indeed to

know where it should be going, there are so many others who will not have anything to say, for whom there will be no dialogue that has any kind of importance, who will not know where it is all going, who will understand neither the questions that are being asked nor the answers that are being proposed. They may even be completely bewildered by the whole thing. They may fear for religious values which they know in their hearts to be completely authentic, indeed in some sense irreplaceable.

(For instance there has always been in the Church of England a special note of respect for the dignity of the personal conscience, and this is something born of no "revolt" but on the contrary, rooted in the most authentic Catholic and monastic past of Anglo-Saxon and medieval England—the clear-eyed and care-free England of Rolle and the Yorkshire hermits, of the author of the *Cloud*, of Lady Julian, of Chaucer's people, of Aelred of Rievaulx or the monk hermits and recluses who lived in the shadow of St. Alban's Abbey It seems to me that the Caroline poets and divines assumed a certain noble responsibility, a risk not without anguish—and who cannot share and respect in his heart the anguish of Donne?—a risk that, in its awful purity, could not but involve deep humility. One can say that T. S. Eliot's *Little Gidding*, and the Christmas sermon of his Becket reflect this spirit and this humility. This is an austerity and beauty which Anglicanism cannot relinquish. Hence let it be clearly said that the Roman Catholic now needs to understand, at least obscurely, that the Anglo-Catholic's repugnance for what seems to him an excessive and arbitrary authoritarianism is not a matter of perversity and self-will but indeed of serious principle. Yet at the same time the Anglo-Catholic will be aware of the opposite danger—the awful readiness of certain Anglican writers and speakers to jettison the most fundamental theological principles and engage irresponsibly in frank agnosticism in order to meet the spirit of the times!)

So then, in closing this parenthesis, let us reflect that the first of the poorer means to Unity is *silence*. While there must be talk and dialogue, there must also be the silence of those who cannot, or do not, participate in any discussions. This silence is a necessary counterpart of the dialogue, and it must be realized for what it is—an implicit admission that all cannot be said, and that agreements are not perfectly possible, and that all the answers are not within our grasp. Discussion that does not arise out of this silence and depend on it for strength, will be illusory.

The silence, even of those who are uneasy or who do not understand, is therefore a guarantee of wholeness and honesty in our ecumenism. And it bears witness to the helplessness of man and to our need for God.

It reminds us of our total dependence on Him for any result that is to have genuine value.

Let us therefore not imagine that we must all have something new and important to say, as if we all knew the answers, whether pessimistic or hopeful! We must remember that this is God's work more than it is ours, and that it must proceed according to a hidden plan that will not be revealed to us all at once, but only in the measure that our silent expectation merits the "word" that will tell us what step to take next.

This silence must not however be the mere dumbness of the disconcerted. It must be turned to God in wakeful hope. It must be a religious silence of listening and of beseeching, in which the simplicity of the poorest and most humble prayer reaches out to Him, not presenting Him with projects He must fulfil, but waiting on His time and His initiative.

Another of the poor and universal means is therefore *prayer*. Not only the official and public prayer of Churches and congregations, but the earnest prayer of the faithful in their own heart. Here one might mention especially the Psalms, as a prayer of anguish and sorrow, of repentance and longing for Unity.

He took them from the darkness and the gloom,
he snapped their chains.
Let them thank the Eternal for his kindness,
and for the wonders that he does for men;
he breaks the gates of bronze,
and shatters iron bars.

Psalm 107: 14-16.

O, then Eternal, our God, save us,
gather us out of the nations,
that we may give thanks to thy sacred name,
and triumph in thy deeds of praise.

Psalm 106: 47.

O thou, who hearest prayer,
all men shall come to thee.
Though our sins be too much for us,
'tis thine to cancel our transgressions.

Psalm 65: 2-3.

In a very special way, *meditation and contemplation* are fruitful for Unity, since in them the Christian leaves the dispersion and distraction of everyday life and sinks down to deeper unity within himself by the quieting of passion and fantasy, the putting off of self, and the complete willingness to obey God without reserve. In meditation, in contemplation above all, man is poor. (Those who think that meditation and contemplation are grand and special, have perhaps not meditated much themselves). In meditation man is reduced to nothing before God. He puts away all his projects and fancies, his self-ideal, his silly complacencies, his imaginings about achievement in the world, in order to become completely what he is—a thing of God, a property of God.

To silence, prayer, meditation and contemplation as “poor means” we can also add that other characteristic form of religious poverty which is *fasting*. But with fasting also goes almsgiving, and here we come out again into the open field where action can be possible and visible. In our alms, whether spiritual or corporal, let us now think of those who belong to other Churches or to no Church—of those whom we would perhaps not normally think of helping. And here of course it can no longer be a mere matter of a sixpence in the blind man’s cup, or a guinea to the hospital fund. There are whole races asking to be fed, to be taught, and to be lifted up.

There is a certain aspect of poverty in those works in which members of different Churches co-operate together, renouncing any special glory or prestige for their own institution.

And there are also all the poorer works, in which men demonstrate together for the cause of peace

The expression “poorer means” is inspired by “les moyens pauvres” of Louis Massignon, the Islamic scholar whom Charles de Foucauld brought back to the faith and who was such a devoted apostle of fraternal unity between Christians and Moslems. For him, the “poorer means” were certainly not restricted to a purely hidden and personal use. He conceived them in a context of conscious ecumenical Unity. His followers, Christian and Moslem, throughout the world join in days of prayer and fasting (usually the first Friday of the month) and sometimes go on pilgrimages together—Massignon had a special appreciation for the reverent practice of visiting the tombs of Moslems and praying for their dead, particularly for Algerians slain in the riots and violence of the fifties in France.

III

We have seen one main reason why the poorer means are most important and most powerful—they imply a more complete surrender to God, a greater delicacy of faith, a deeper appreciation of honest differences, a renunciation of concern with results, a more profound humility and purity of heart. They look more to God than to man’s ingenuity and effort. They rely more on His mercy than on our own generosity, and yet they are in their own way most generous.

There is another reason which is historical.

It can be said that ecumenism in its deepest and most living form has been born in the trenches and barracks of wars and concentration camps. Certainly the rich flowering of ecumenism in Germany was due in large part to the fact that pastors and priests were thrown together in the destitution of the camps, worked and suffered together in the greatest deprivation without any chance, humanly speaking, to accomplish anything. Yet it was here by God’s grace that wonderful things were indeed accomplished and a new understanding, blessed by a new charity and a new humility, came to light.

The brotherhood and understanding which have brought to life such miraculous new hopes and fruitful efforts toward Unity, were certainly born of poverty, suffering, humiliation, degradation. Let us never forget that the ecumenical movement in its very origins is sealed with the sign of poverty.

IV

Merciful Lord, who prayed that we might be one, who died that we might be one, show us the true path to Unity. Bless, we beseech you, the sincere, devoted efforts of the Churches and their Shepherds to come together in one. Bless above all and enlighten our own hearts to know and understand the power of silence, prayer and fasting, so that we may more perfectly obey your hidden and mysterious will by which alone we can become truly one. For the glory of the Father, in the Word, through the Holy Spirit. Amen.