

THE UNITY OF THE CHURCH

A Study of John XVII.

By REV. WALTER EBSWORTH.

THE Last Supper was over; the consummation of Eternal Love had been reached in that stupendous miracle—the institution of the Blessed Eucharist; they had fed upon His Sacred Body, they had drunk the Chalice of His Precious Blood; and for two hours or more had they listened as He spoke His farewell message, the while their souls were ravished with the mystery of their first Holy Communion.

They had left the Supper-Room, and had followed Him out through the shadows of the moonlit streets to the Temple. He was on His way to Gethsemani. A few steps further would lead them out through the south-eastern gate of the city, and the climb down the rocky path to the Brook Kedron and the rough journey along the river-bed to the Garden of Olives would stop all conversation. That last section of the journey, too, as they plunged into the dank and dim ravine, “the dimmest place in all the world,” and clambered slowly and cautiously through its forbidding gloom, would correspond to the terrible change that would come over the soul of Christ as “He began ‘to grow heavy and to be sad,’ ‘sorrowful unto death.’” Hence, while their souls were still on fire, while still they lingered spellbound at the promise and the tenderness in His last words, He stayed His steps awhile to address Himself to His Heavenly Father in prayer. Had they reached the Temple, and was it in the sacred precincts that His parting words were spoken? It seems more than likely they were uttered within sight or under the shadow of the sacred enclosure that, spread over eight acres, crowned the top of one of the five hills of Jerusalem.

THE TEMPLE.

The Temple! The place was surely appropriate. Nowhere else could the outline of His future Church be more fitly drawn, or more impressively, than without the Old Law sanctuary.

The ancient world (so we are told) had nothing to display quite comparable with the wonder-temple of Jerusalem. There had been larger, more massive, costlier, architectural triumphs, but nothing which combined such graceful proportions with such subtle artistic beauty. Never was a mighty structure so uniquely situated; never, perhaps, a site so exquisitely adorned. Rising majestically to the summit of Mount Moriah, flanked on two sides by precipitous cliffs of varying height, it dominated the Holy City, and truly looked what indeed it was, the Place of God and the Altar of Sacrifice between earth and Heaven.

The Temple! The massive, bronze Corinthian gates; the countless monolithic pillars of white marble; the great sheets of wrought gold that covered the mighty walls of Herod’s superb edifice; the lovely marble courts, now flooded in Paschal moonlight; what a glorious setting for the final act of Our Saviour’s life before commencing His Passion!

Through the bronze portals could be seen the sleeping city, typical of the unknown world beyond, also sleeping, heavy with sin; while framed in the lofty courtyard pillars, bathed in Oriental moonlight, was the Temple proper, the Holy Place—truly a ready picture of the Church to come—massive, enduring, dominating, indestructible. The Jews had laughed Him to scorn when they understood Him to promise to destroy this Temple and in three days rebuild it. It seemed well-nigh eternal, and then God Himself was in that place.

The place was appropriate. Once a year, at the Pasch, the High Priest offered special sacrifice, entering the Holy of Holies. Now, the great High Priest of the New Testament is about to climb the Mount of Sacrifice to give Himself a Sacrifice for His people. The solemn offering of that Sacrifice, with an assurance of its efficacy, forms the burden of the Prayer of Christ which fills the whole of the 17th chapter of St. John’s Gospel.

There are commentators of great renown who hold that the sacred text would make this Prayer the conclusion of the Discourse following the Last Supper, and, therefore (sic), the solemn and reluctant farewell to the scene of the first Eucharist. It was spoken, they say, in the Supper-Room. Others, quoting the following verse xviii., 1,

“When Jesus had said these things

He went forth (exiit) with His disciples over the Brook Kedron,”

would place the prayer in the vicinity of the Vale of Hinnom. Others again, with equal Scriptural warrant and

perhaps more reason, locate the Prayer as ‘somewhere on the way between the Super-Room and Gethsemani.’ It was a fairly long walk, and it is more than likely that the time was beguiled by part, at least, of the long farewell discourse so lastingly impressed on the memory of St. John. Indeed, thoughts therein were probably suggested on the way; the lovely passage beginning

“I am the true vine,”

conceivably had a practical illustration—it was so like their Master’s simple method; the sights and sounds of the city, the hostile city of the hills, visible from so many points of vantage, while prompting the thought of the “many mansions” of His Father, reminded Him, too, of the hostility of the greater world that lay beyond:

“I have chosen you out of the world: therefore the world hateth you.”

And then the splendid vision of the Temple, as it came in sight, across the Valley of the Cheesemongers, which ran the length of the Holy City, may have called forth the words

“They will put you out of the synagogues.”

From then the note of sorrow creeps more markedly into His words. The Temple and its awful destruction, already predicted, and the still more awful destruction of the people of God—these were thoughts calculated to oppress His human Heart, which loved so dearly the land and the People He had chosen for His own.

It is no part of our argument to claim the Temple as the scene of the great Prayer in John xvii. The words of the Prayer would have equal force spoken anywhere. But nowhere else do they fit so naturally; there, in its shadow, more than elsewhere, can the imagination grasp the great historical fact, the abrogation of the Old Covenant in favour of the New.

THE PRAYER.

The stage was set—the Master, the Temple, the city, the silence, the mystery of the place, and, over all, the pale moon of Nisan high in the clear night sky lighting the world—with glory, the glory of God, it seemed to the Apostles. It is with this last thought the Prayer begins:

(a) Introduction.

1. Lifting up His eyes to Heaven, He said: “Father, the hour is come, glorify Thy Son,

2. that Thy Son may glorify Thee. As Thou

hast given Him power over all flesh, that He may give eternal life to all whom Thou

3. hast given Him. Now this is eternal life: that they may know Thee, the, only true God, and Jesus Christ, Whom Thou hast sent.

4. “I have glorified Thee on the earth: I have finished. the work which Thou gavest

5. Me to do: and now glorify Thou, Me, O Father, with the glory which I had, before

6. the world was, with Thee. I have manifested Thy name, to the men whom Thou hast given Me out of the world..

Thine they, were, and to Me Thou gavest them:

7. and they have kept Thy word. Now they have known that all things which Thou

8. hast given Me are from Thee: because the words which Thou gavest Me I have given to them, and they have received them, and have known in very deed that I came out from Thee, and they have believed that Thou didst send Me.

9. “I pray for them: I pray not for the world, but for them whom Thou hast given

10. Me: because they are Thine; and all My things are Thine, and Thine are Mine:

11. and I am glorified in them. And now I am not in the world, and these are in the world, and I come to Thee.

(b) Petition.

“Holy Father, keep them in Thy name which Thou hast given Me: that they may be one, as We also are.

12. “While I was with them, I kept them in Thy name. Those whom Thou gavest Me have I kept: and none of them is lost but the son of perdition, that the scripture may

13. be fulfilled. And now I come to Thee: and these things I speak in the world, that they may have My joy filled in themselves.

14. I have given them Thy word, and the world hath hated them, because they are not of the world, as I also am not of the world.

15. "I pray not that Thou shouldst take them out of the world, but that Thou shouldst

16. keep them from (the) evil. They are not of the world: as I also am not of the world.

17. "Sanctify them in (the) truth. Thy word

18. is truth. As Thou hast sent Me into the world, I also have sent them into the world.

19. And for them do I sanctify Myself: that they also may be sanctified in truth.

20. "And not for them only do I pray, but for them also who through their word shall believe in Me:

21. that they all may be one, as Thou, Father, in Me, and I in Thee: that They also may be one in Us: that the world may believe that Thou hast sent Me;

22. and the glory which Thou hast given Me, I have given to them: that they may be one, as We also are one.

23. I in them, and Thou in Me: that they may be made perfect in one; and the world may know that Thou hast sent Me, and hast loved them, as Thou hast loved Me.

(c) Peroration.

24. "Father, I will that where I am, they also whom Thou hast given Me may be with Me: that they may see My glory which Thou hast given Me, because Thou hast loved me before the foundation of the world.

25. "Just Father, the world hath not known Thee: but I have known Thee: and these

26. have known that Thou hast sent Me: and I have made known Thy name to them, and will make it known; that the love, wherewith Thou hast loved Me, may be in them, and I in them."

There the Prayer ends.

MINOR FEATURES.

There are several incidental features of the Prayer which cannot be overlooked. In the first place, Christ claims to be God: or, rather, He makes a simple statement of the fact which should not properly be called a claim. In the opening verses (1-5) we find indirect inferences, especially the two-fold mention of the "glory" common to Father and Son. But there is no ambiguity about the several passages in which He refers to His "Oneness" with His Eternal Father. This affirmation of unity with the Father, that is, His Divinity, is more than ever necessary now when the Apostles are receiving the Deposit of Truth, and invests this Prayer with deeper solemnity and significance.

Another remarkable feature is verse 3, which might be taken as a definition of Christian faith here, or as a description of the Beatific Vision, the happiness of Heaven, hereafter. Noteworthy, too, are the words:

"As Thou hast sent Me into the world, So also have I sent them into the world":

which, taken in conjunction with the solemn mission given on Easter night:

"As the Father hath sent Me, I also send you."

may be definitely interpreted, especially when their position in the Prayer is considered, as conferring absolute teaching authority. The Apostles were not only to take His place, they were to act and teach in His Name, and with His authority-the authority of the Eternal Father Himself. No less interesting is the title, Jesus Christ, by which here alone our Saviour designates Himself.

And now for a detailed

ANALYSIS OF THE PRAYER.

The Prayer is easily divisible into three parts, each significantly opening with the title, Father:

1. A statement of the circumstances of the Prayer. This includes a formal request for His own glorification.

2. The Prayer proper, which is first spoken for the Apostles, then extended to include His disciples to the end of time, then amplified and repeated in detail.

3. A peroration, a prayer for final perseverance "with a *Volo* of particularly strong petition," probably intended specially for the Apostles, but applicable to His whole future Church.

1. The Circumstances.

The circumstances of the Prayer are of the utmost importance. Immediately the Prayer is concluded, St. John continues:

“When Jesus had said these things,

He went forth with His disciples over the brook Kedron, where there was a garden, into which He entered with His disciples.”

Gethsemani! the Garden of the Agony! The Prayer then is the last official act of His life before commencing His sacred Passion. Lest there be any suspicion of undue colouring in using the phrase, “official act,” it is as well to quote Kochhafe,* known to Protestant works as “one of the last fathers of Lutheranism.” In his commentary on this chapter he calls it “the great sacerdotal prayer of Christ,” and stressing its importance says: “He speaks like a Pontiff.”

But outside testimony to its importance is unnecessary. Our Lord Himself, in the introduction to the Prayer (1-10), emphasises its significance. The Apostles are standing with Him at the parting of the ways. “The hour is come. . . . I have finished the work which Thou gavest Me to do ... and now ... I come to Thee.” Tiny extracts give no idea of the poignancy of the parting words. He is leaving them, He is leaving them to return to His Father; He is leaving them alone, alone in the world without Him.

His own work is finished. “I have glorified Thee on the earth. . . . I have manifested Thy Name to the men whom Thou hast given Me out of the world . . . the words which Thou gavest Me I have given to them.” But now? “Now, I am not in the world, and these are in the world, and I come to Thee. . . . While I was with them I kept them in Thy Name ... and now I come to Thee.” Only a few pieces torn from the context, but what an idea they convey of the earnestness in the words and manner of their departing Master. “He speaks like a Pontiff;” he speaks like a father making his dying depositions; like the patriarch Jacob conferring his blessings on his twelve sons before being “gathered to his fathers.”

Briefly, He declares the triple reason for the Prayer:

“Because they are Thine” (9),

“and I am glorified in them” (10),

“and they are in the world”—alone (11).

2. The Prayer Proper.

Then simply and briefly He states His petition:

“Pater Sancte, serva eos in Nomine Tuo, quod dedisti Mihi, ut sint unum, sicut et Nos.”

“Holy Father,* keep them in Thy Name, Which Thou hast given Me, that they may be one, as We also are.”

This is the theme of His Prayer. It may be divided into three parts:

1. Keep them

2. That they may be one

3. As We are One.

A careful reading will show that this is the very soul of Christ’s petition. His Church is to be holy, “sanctified in truth” (v. 19), catholic, too (v. 20), and apostolic (vv. 18-20); but these are merely passing thoughts in a prayer that is almost wholly concerned with unity. And the very direct petition of v. 15, in which He prays His Father to “keep them from (the) evil,” does not weaken this contention, for, seeing that the burden of the Prayer is for unity, it is only a natural inference that the evil especially feared is disunity. But it may be something else, yet something that of itself demolishes unity.

“Sanctifica eos in veritate . . . “Sanctify them in the truth.” (v. 17).

Would it be the opposite of truth, the falsification of His teaching? This undoubtedly would seriously hinder or frustrate their sanctification. Even so, the idea is the same, for false doctrine invariably breeds disunity. When the standards of religious revolt were raised in the sixteenth century and avaricious princes sought to tear their peoples from the centre of Catholic unity, if Western Europe had as yet no firsthand knowledge of the devastation that follows

* *Kochhafe: latine Chytraeus.*

* *Holy Father: this expression occurs nowhere else in the Gospels.*

schism, it was to learn, and speedily, too, by bitter experience, that doctrinal innovation and disunity are synonymous terms.

Looking into the future, our Saviour saw the shocks awaiting His Church. He saw the struggle of the Apostolic ages against ancient paganism, with Truth inevitably prevailing. But he saw worse storms preparing, schisms and heresies almost without number which would shake the Church to its foundations. The greatest trials would come from within. He saw heretical forces hurling themselves against the great Repository of Truth.

“Father, keep them from the evil.” His prayer was heard, for confusion has always followed schism, Scattered around the Rock of Peter today are seen the broken remnants of rebellious creeds, but the children of the Kingdom are still united in their ancient Faith.

So our Blessed Saviour prayed for unity, and five times the petition recurs with increasing emphasis:

1. Holy Father, keep them . . . that they may be one, as We also are (v. 11); ,
2. That they also may be one, as Thou, Father, in Me, and I in Thee (v. 21);
3. That they also may be one in Us: that the world may believe that Thou hast sent Me, and the glory which Thou hast given Me, I have given to them (vv. 21-22) ;
4. That they may be one, as We also are One, I in them, and Thou in Me (vv. 22-23);
5. That they may be made perfect in one; and the world may know that Thou hast sent Me, and hast loved them as Thou hast also loved Me (v. 23).

“That they may be one.” Five times, no less!

Our Lord—we say it with reverence—was in deadly earnest. He never spoke more seriously, never used simpler language.

EMPHASIS BY REPETITION.

It is impossible to dismiss as negligible, unwise to underestimate, this repetition on the lips of the Christ. It was a familiar method of imparting instruction. He used it constantly to give a solemn earnestness to His ordinary teaching. He was dealing with a people “foolish and slow,” “hard of heart,” “perverse,” and often hostile; and reiteration was necessary to drive His words home. But was there any absolute necessity for Him to repeat Himself in prayer? None whatever, unless He intended His prayer to be an instruction as well.

There is the similar example of the Agony in the Garden later this same night, where, during the hour-long struggle with a sorrow unto death, He kept praying “the self-same prayer.” We know that His prayer was heard, because “an Angel appeared from Heaven, comforting Him,” and He rose, refreshed and strengthened, to go out and meet the traitor. Who that writes of this sorrowful prelude to His Passion but will quote it as a Divine illustration of meeting trouble with prayer, and of perseverance in that prayer? For His prayer is more than a prayer, it is a Divine lesson.

And the great Prayer of Christ in this 17th chapter of St. John, too. As St. Thomas Aquinas wrote: The Prayer of Christ is more for our instruction. It may show the value of repeating the selfsame prayer, but it is intended as well to reveal and perpetuate the institutional character of Christ’s Church—its unity.

HEBREW AND SYRO-CHALDAIC.

To see more clearly how true this is, we must remember the character of Hebrew, which might be called the parent-stock of the Syro-Chaldaic spoken by Our Lord and His contemporaries. Though most ancient in origin—the Hebrews believed it to be the speech of the Garden of Eden—“the sacred language” had retained a primitive simplicity, avoiding the grand style and elaborate constructions of the classic tongues. Its vocabulary is surprisingly meagre, being notably wanting in philosophical terms and abstract ideas. For example, there is no equivalent for the word “religion,” which is imperfectly, though very practically, often rendered “fear of the Lord.” And God’s Eternity, the unicum in stans of philosophy, inexpressible because humanly inconceivable, is simply rendered by the Wise Man:—“A thousand years with Thee are but a day.” Could a child fail to catch the meaning? Could a great philosopher make it clearer in so few words? Superlatives especially are wanting, hence emphasis, so overdone in modern speech, is expressed, and very effectively, by striking similes or more often by simple reiteration. Who can miss the inexorable force of the Mosaic judgment: “Dying he shall die.” Or the warning in the words of Christ: “He that hath ears to hear

let him hear.” Or the power and authority in the revelation to St. John: “These things saith the Holy One and the True One, He that hath the key of David, He that openeth and no man shutteth, shutteth and no man openeth.”

This simplicity of expression, necessitating as it does the liberal use of poetic comparisons and vivid repetitions, has undoubtedly made for beauty. But, while we sometimes hold our breath at the sheer loveliness of Scriptural passages, we are not permitted to lose sight of their impressiveness or of the straining of the writer to force home his point. If the language was inadequate, at least he made good use of it: if his hearers were not trained logicians, they never failed to understand the universal language of signs, and signs were freely used. Repetition was more than a poetic picturesqueness; it was the quaint but determined effort of a simple language to express itself more forcibly.

Now, the speech of our Saviour was not Biblical Hebrew: but it was a dialect of kindred stock, and certainly of similar characteristics, used as it was collaterally with the Hebrew of the synagogues. Since it was not as yet a recognised literary medium, its forms were probably cruder, and a free expression was only attained by a rich Oriental imagery, which was not so much, an affectation as a necessity.

“Never man spoke like this Man,” they said of Our Blessed Lord. Possibly the tone of authority which so accorded with His naturally majestic bearing lent colour to the thought, but His very words have borne the test of time. The loftiest conceptions of which the human mind is capable are conveyed in words that even a child may understand. The almost primitive dialect of Palestine has become the effective medium of Divine Revelation.

So with the case in point. Mark the utter simplicity and clarity of the Prayer. There is nothing cryptic, hardly a word except sanctify (v. 19)*, which requires special explanation, or has lost in translation. Our Lord does not pray in abstruse theological terminology that the Church of His institution be endowed with unity of faith, of worship, of government. The language was defective, and His Apostles would scarce have understood. Yet these are the ideas conveyed, though the words be ever so simple. How memorable the occasion—the night of the Passion; and the repetition so fraught with meaning, so full of Divine assurance! Nowhere else, save in the equally momentous Eucharistic promise of John vi., does our Saviour repeat the same idea so many times, and here is the double idea: “one, as We are One.” It is the dominant chord in the Master’s farewell, a chord that lingers, not dying ‘now with the sadly sweet intonation of His voice, but lasting into the future to be the motif in the harmony of the Church-to-be. How foolish and illogical many centuries later for people of a changed mentality and totally different forms of speech to squeeze all real significance from out these marvellous words.

Was this the whole of Christ’s Prayer: or was it simply what St. John remembered under the light of Divine grace? We cannot say; but this much is certain, St. John was deeply impressed by the fervour in his Master’s words. and the Holy Ghost, who refreshed his memory and guided his pen, intended what was written for our special instruction.

It was popular in the heyday of French and German Rationalism to question the authorship of the Fourth Gospel. Higher Critics, as they modestly called one another, judged from internal evidence that it was impossible for the Gospel to have been written in the lifetime of St. John, and, indeed, until long after, and one reason given was the clear definition of the Church therein depicted. It could only have been written, they said, when the Church had attained a certain period of development and had a thorough consciousness of itself.

Happily, Scriptural tradition has recovered from the first shock of this arbitrary conclusion, and no one of any critical authority doubts to-day that the Fourth Gospel belongs to the first century, but it caused much doubt and gained considerable support in non-Catholic circles. The theory “died the death,” but at least it had this good effect, it drew attention to the theological wealth of St. John’s Gospel, and after the magnificent exposition of the Divinity of Christ, in the first chapter, the outstanding lesson, so unique, so emphatic, so consciously and deliberately constructive, is surely the Unity of Christ’s Church as defined in the seventeenth chapter.

**Sanctify: The Greek verb is “hagiazō,” which is better rendered “consecrate,” being the sacred word regularly used in the Old Testament Greek to express priestly ordination, or the dedication of the sacrifices (cf. Exod. xxix., 1 and 26), just as “hagiasma” meant the sanctuary. The use of the legal term seems more than accidental. The text may be rendered thus: For them do I dedicate my Sacrifice that they may be consecrated fit ministers and preachers of the Truth.*

PERFECT UNITY!

“That they may be one.” Five times these words recur, and the force of this reiteration should not be missed. Unity, and unity alone, is His constant petition, for, given unity, all things else would follow. Unity then was to be the fundamental necessity, the principal mark, of His Church. And that unity was to be perfect. “That they may be made perfect in one,” is the climax, the final request.

Perfect unity! Did it not seem a dream, a beautiful dream, but something quite impossible with fallen man? Yet our Saviour insists on the idea of unity, and perfect unity at that. And, as if our feeble language were incapable of describing the perfect oneness required, He attaches thereto the following remarkable words-and note again the repetition and the varied emphasis:

(“That they may be one”)

1. “As We are One” (v. 11);
2. “As Thou, Father, in Me, and I in Thee” (v. 21);
3. “In Us” (v. 21);
4. “As We also are One” (v. 22);
5. “I in them, and Thou in Me” (v. 23).

Which, if words have any meaning, is comparing the perfect oneness of His future Church with the supreme, incomprehensible Unity of the Trinity.

THE TRIUNE GOD.

Can we form a mental picture of God? Were a traveller back from Terra Australis two centuries ago to tell of a new discovery which he designated *macropus giganteus*, Europeans could have formed a fairly accurate mental picture of the kangaroo from his description. But the mystery of God is forever infinitely beyond us. When God said to Moses: “I AM WHO AM,” if the description of Himself was not complete, at least it was the simplest way the human mind would grasp the thought of God.

He is Life and the Author of life, Being and the Cause, of being. His Essence is Existence. He is not composed of parts, “in Him there is no change or shadow of alteration,” no succession, no division, no separation of perfections. All is Unity, incommunicable, unattainable, utter simplicity. “Deus est actus purus,” said St. Thomas Aquinas, in a brilliant, but oh! how inadequate an effort to reduce the Almighty to philosophical terms.

And how describe the Trinity? St. Thomas and the Schoolmen endeavoured humbly to do so, in a way that is probably true:-The Father, the Infinite and Eternal, the supreme act of Being; the Word or Son, the infinite and eternal act of Divine Self-consciousness, and because infinite and eternal, a Divine Person, Himself God, and possessing equally the Divine Essence; and the Holy Ghost, the infinite and eternal act of Divine Satisfaction and mutual Love, therefore a third Person within God. It is the highest mystery of our Faith, the Trinity of God in His Absolute Unity.

COMPARISON WITH THE TRINITY.

Yet, Our Lord made a comparison which man with all his foolish vanity would not be daring or presumptuous enough to make (but that He made it first), between the unity of the Church and the Unity which is God. And even in the face of that comparison, despite the human frailty of its living constituents, He allowed Himself to picture the unity of His Church as “perfect.”

It is not right to minimise the value of His words, and to say they are a loose description, a comparison that should not be overdone, a simple, homely lesson to His disciples. Certainly, He was anxious that His Apostles know the fact that He claimed to be true God, consubstantial with the Father, and therefore in their hearing and for their benefit He addressed the Eternal One as an equal-“as We are One.” But it cannot be said that He chose words lightly or used them inaccurately or repeated them carelessly: so when He prayed: “That they may be One, as We are . . . as Thou, Father, in Me, and I in Thee,” it must be admitted that He offered as the sublimest of prototypes for His Church, “that ineffable Pattern, wherein all is substantial unity in a distinction of Persons,” and therefore placed no limits to its essential unity.

That comparison must have been justified, and the perfect unity visualised not only was possible, but must have been realised. "Thou in Me, I in them," only a prayer, but realised, nevertheless, for He said: "I am with you all days even to the consummation of the world." The unity of the Church, which is compared with the oneness of the Blessed Trinity-and which is stated to be founded on the Holy Trinity-"one in Us," and on the perpetual abiding of Christ Himself-"I in them," must be like that abiding, a fact to the end of time.

Where in Christendom is that positive, supernatural unity to be found, save in the One, Holy, Catholic and Apostolic Church, founded on St. Peter and governed by his successors, the Bishops of Rome? Did that perfect unity of faith, of worship, of government, ever fail? Was it ever found elsewhere? Pertinent questions, having each one answer, and that indisputable. And if Christ lives again and is glorified in His Church, the promise of perennial unity can find no fulfilment elsewhere.

PROTESTANT "UNITY OF SPIRIT."

Non-Catholic commentators, bereft as they are of the wonderful actual experience of unity which is the happy inheritance of children of the Faith, but compelled to provide some suitable explanation of our Saviour's emphatic insistence on unity as well as an apology for the manifest disintegration of Protestantism, suggest, in words that are generally very vague, that the unity in question is what they call "unity of spirit." Christians throughout the world, they say, striving ever upwards, are united in spirit through the common possession of the same blessed hope and through the personal love of "the one true God and Jesus' Christ Whom He hath sent." Though divided into different camps, they are followers of the one great Leader, and their warfare is against the same enemies. Eventually there will be a general recognition of the futility of dogmatic differences and an undivided Christendom bound together simply by the ties of faith, hope, and love.

A pretty conception, and indeed an interesting suggestion, but it finds no place in Our Lord's prophetic prayer, where unity and the truth alone are mentioned and are emphasised as inseparable co-ordinates of His Kingdom.

"Unity of spirit" is only a clumsy makeshift, and comes disingenuously from the very dogmatic dividers of Christendom. It is idle to pretend that any such spirit exists outside the Catholic Church. Unity cannot be found, and never has existed, save on the Rock-foundation which was the institution of Christ (Math. xvi., 18). We must accept the Church as Christ left her, and as the Holy Ghost, "the Spirit of Truth," abiding with her for ever (John, xiv., 16, 26, and xvi., 13) has preserved her. Our Saviour knew what was in man, his perversity, his errability, and He safeguarded her from without. Only human perversity could have suggested the alternative, which is a nebulous, impossible theory, designed, speaking colloquially, to make the best of a bad job.

UNITY THAT IS VISIBLE.

Nearly four hundred years ago, unscrupulous, irreligious, rapacious princes, not one of whom even Protestants revere, slashed and hacked at the Church, and severed great sections, which, unfortunately for their descendants, have continued the process ever since. The fact is there, and is nowhere so striking and deplorable as on the mission-fields, where the poor heathen finds it hard to reconcile the claims and teachings of Christianity with such discord and division, and harder still to discover where is the True Light. And has he any infallible test? He has, and again the Prayer provides it. It is visible unity.

Christ prayed:

1. "That they may be one, that the world may believe that Thou hast sent Me, and the glory which Thou hast given Me, I have given to them.
2. "That they may be made perfect in one, that 'the world may know that Thou hast sent Me, and hast loved them as Thou hast loved Me.'"

It was to be Unity versus Disunity, and the world was to be the judge. He had spoken of "the world" many times this night, and always to signify the hostile, unbelieving peoples amongst whom the Apostles would be working. Willing or unwilling, it would witness to His Church, by acknowledging the moral miracle of its unity. Doctrinal truth is not proposed by Christ as leading men to embrace the communion of the Household of the Faith, rather the perfect union of that household is a certain test of the truth of its doctrines. Yet the outside world has adopted the un-Christian

attitude of confessing to the actuality of that unity, while failing to make the obvious inference that there alone can rest the Deposit of Truth.

The unity of the Church was to be visible, visible to the world, even to the world that would hate it. For the Church has an extraordinary mission—to demonstrate in itself the Divinity of Christ. Firm as the Rock on which it is built, unassailable as the Pyramids, it is a silent monument, yet a living witness to the Divinity of Christ. How? By its oneness, its perfect oneness.

How can anyone dare to underestimate the value of the clearly visible unity of the Catholic Church? He was constantly appealing to His works, to His miracles, especially His Resurrection, to His prophecies, and to His fulfilment of Scriptural predictions—“they testify of Me.” And the character of the Church, above and beyond all else its visible unity, was His final prophecy, a living, permanent, unmistakably visible witness for the whole world to see, testifying in itself to the fact that He “came out from God,” that He was true God as well as true man.

There is no doubt about the meaning of the Prayer in this great chapter of St. John. Our Blessed Saviour prayed for unity in His Church to the end of time, and He contemplated a visible unity for all the world to see, a unity so perfect that, with a gracious flight of fancy no human tongue could forestall, He compared it with the sublimest of Divine Mysteries—the Unity within the most Holy Trinity.

HIS FINAL PROPHECY.

Now, can this Prayer be taken as a prophecy? Was this Prayer heard? Was it efficacious?

How can we believe otherwise. “Il sait que ce qu’il décide s’exécutera,” says a French writer. He prays as one who knows He will be heard. And, indeed, it would be a want of faith, if not a blasphemy, to hold that this Prayer to His Heavenly Father, so direct, so emphatic, so persevering, and offered in such dramatic circumstances should go unanswered. *La priere se perpetue*. It has had, and will have, its perpetuation in the Catholic Church.

“Surely,” says Cardinal Billot, “this Prayer, representing the absolute will of Christ, must in all things have been infallibly fulfilled.” The absolute will of Christ! A point so obvious in every sentence of our Saviour’s last petition. He could pray like us for whatever might seem humanly desirable, yet, like us, in perfect resignation to the Wisdom of His Father: “nevertheless, not My will, but Thine, be done.” But here there is, no such condition, His glorification is identified with an indefectible Church, and His Sacrifice is offered for that end.

Further, if “the prayer of the just man pierces the clouds,” what of the prayers of the “Just One” Himself? “If you ask the Father anything in My Name,” He assured them, “He will give it you.” In His Name! What, then, if He asked Himself? “I will ask the Father. and He shall give you another Comforter.” The answer is simply taken for granted. Is there any need to stress this point further?

But we should miss entirely the value of the Prayer if we overlooked the nature of the two Persons most intimately concerned. It is God the Son addressing God the Father—God the Son made man, certainly, but the Eternal Son of the Almighty Father nevertheless:

Cujus una stilla salvum facere

Totum mundum quit ab omni scelere:

a single drop of His Precious Blood could have redeemed the world, for the least action of His life, we are taught, had merit immeasurable, being attributable, albeit a human action, to an Infinite Personality.

Here, however, we must make quite clear the commonsense of Catholic theology. “Whenever Christ prayed,” writes Dr. Leonard,* “He prayed as man. As the Son of God He could not pray, for He had only the one omnipotent Will of the Godhead. On account of the dignity of the Person that prayed, and His human sanctity, no prayer of Christ passed unheard, but, according to circumstances, the tone of assurance in which the prayer was voiced could range through the whole vast interval which ‘the form of a servant’-united to the Godhead-admitted.” Here and now we have the God-Man solemnly dedicating His final Sacrifice:

“For them do I sanctify Myself”:

I consecrate Myself a Victim. His ineffable Sacrifice, than which no offering could be more powerful, more efficacious, is here dedicated for them.

**Rev. W. Leonard, D.D., in “The Australasian Catholic Record,” July, 1933.*

This is well called “the Sacerdotal Prayer of Christ.” As Dr. Leonard observes in his beautiful study of the Prayer, this title has completely established itself in modern usage, although it is ancient. The point is strongly emphasised again and again by St. Cyril of Alexandria (376-444), in a very long exposition of the Prayer, for example:—“Once again as man, the Reconciler and ‘Mediator of God and man exercises His mediation, and that truly great and most holy Pontiff of ours obtains by His supplications the favour of His Father, making priestly offering of Himself for us.” Yes, as the High Priest approaches the Altar of Sacrifice, He presents one petition with the offering of the Victim:

“Father, I have glorified Thee . . .

“Now glorify Thou Me . . .

“I am glorified in them” . . .

Not only would He be glorified by their belief in His Divinity, but the wondrous harmony and perfection of His earthly kingdom also would contribute to the glory of its Founder. The sole condition is unity. That assured, its mission of sanctification would continue unhindered, uninterrupted: and so He asks for unity in exchange for His own great Sacrifice.

Note the logical sequence:—The merit of His Sacrifice will ensure that His Church will never depart from its primitive unity: perpetual unity will ensure the preservation of the truth: and the truth, its privileges and graces, will sanctify them, for they will be “heirs indeed of God, and co-heirs with Christ,” “the Father will love them” even as He loves His own Divine Son.

We remember with sorrow how the early “reformers” of the sixteenth century plunged into their wild orgy of new doctrine—“wild-cat theology,” Americans would call it today. Even their children modified it, and their children’s children have long since rejected it. What a mockery of the eternal, unchangeable Truth!

THE EUCHARIST AND UNITY.

For Catholics, the heirs of both unity and truth, there is a secondary meaning in the words ‘sanctified in Truth,’ which at once suggests the source of unity and explains its operation. “The Truth” is a name our Blessed Saviour gave Himself: “I am the Way, the Truth, and the Life”: and in very fact are we sanctified in Him, in His Sacred Flesh and Blood. “He that eateth My Flesh and drinketh My Blood abideth in Me and I in Him.” The Eucharistic Sacrifice, which everlastingly continues and represents “the Lord’s Death,” and extends the grace and operation of that “full, perfect, and sufficient Sacrifice” on Calvary, everlastingly protects the children of His kingdom by communicating to them “the Bread of Life,” and all the graces which flow, as from a fountain inexhaustible, from the Table of the Lord. For them, in the Mass, He “sanctifies” Himself, constantly, everywhere, “that they may be sanctified in Truth.” The very word “Communion” means unity, oneness with Christ, “I in them.”

HOW UNITY WAS ENSURED.

These last considerations suggest the final question:

Did our Divine Lord, in this Prayer, or on the occasion of this Prayer, reveal how unity, perfect unity, would be attained, and retained, within His Church?

He did. It was not only by the preservation of the truth, although He distinctly prays for their sanctification in truth, and, therefore, ensured its permanence. But truth needs, preserving as well as unity. The loss of truth, despite irreproachable virtue and the sincerest searchings after the “True Light,” can only, have the, disastrous opposite effect, as history testifies, of dismembering Christendom. Did He make provision for preserving both truth and unity?

We find the answer in the 22nd chapter of St. Luke’s Gospel, where Our Lord says solemnly to St. Peter:

“Simon, Simon,

behold Satan hath desired to have you

that he might sift you as wheat:

but I have prayed for thee

that thy faith fail not:

and thou, having once been converted, confirm

thy brethren.”

From the context in St. Luke we find these words occur between the Last Supper and the Agony in Gethsemani, and therefore were spoken about the same time as the great Prayer of John xvii., the two being separated, if at all, by not more than a few minutes.

Were they leaving the sacred precincts of the Temple and gazing through the Paschal moonlight across the hills and valleys of Southern Judea? Did their thoughts go back to the terrible prophecies of three days before, when our Saviour had foretold the utter destruction of the glorious Temple of Herod? What could keep the future Church from crumbling similarly to ruin, or save it from the onslaughts of enemies bent on its destruction? Again Our Lord anticipated their doubts.

The rustling of leaves in the breeze off the desert probably recalled the work so familiar.

PETER'S UNIFYING FAITH.

“Simon, Simon, behold Satan hath desired to have you that he might sift you as wheat,” to separate you one from another, to shake you to pieces—the metaphor suggests extreme violence. And note the plural number, you, the Apostles, yes, and “all those who through their word shall believe in Me.” Then the sudden change to thee, as He focuses attention on St. Peter. “But I have prayed for thee”—where? was it in the Prayer just finished, was that prayer - for unity a prayer, too, for the safeguarding of Peter's faith? “That thy faith fail not”—surely there is question here of Peter's infallibility as well as of his primacy, and of the primacy and infallibility of his successors, the Roman Pontiffs, which even prejudiced critics will readily admit have made for perfect unity.

It is noteworthy that in neither case is holiness, or even the great Christian virtue of charity (love), even hinted at—these must follow their sanctification in the truth and the preservation of Peter's faith. But it is noteworthy that in both cases is there reference to unity. “**Confirm* thy brethren.**” Peter is the strengthener, the confirmer—and what is that but the unifier?—of his brethren, he would keep them together, would keep them one.

PETER THE ROCK.

And as Apostolic unity would live on in the Church to the end of time, so with the unifying faith of Peter. What building is safe whose foundations are unsound? And what more natural, more necessary than that Christ Our Lord should firmly establish His Church, as, indeed, He did, on a saving foundation?

“Thou art Peter (the Rock),”

He had promised (Matt., xvi., 18), “and on this rock I will build My Church; and the gates of hell shall not prevail against it:

and to thee will I give the keys of the kingdom of heaven.”**

What does a rock-foundation do? It prevents a structure from falling or being shaken to pieces; it holds it together, it keeps it one. Unity again!

“ONE FOLD AND ONE SHEPHERD.”

Only a few short days will pass, and again will come a parting, this time the final farewell as He ascends to the Father. The Good Shepherd is leaving His “little flock,” but not unguarded. There shall still be “one fold (or flock) and one shepherd.” To Peter he gives the universal commission:

“Feed My lambs .

shepherd My little sheep .

feed My sheep.” (John, xxi.)

What is it gives the Catholic Church, and always will give, its undeniably perfect unity? What else but the ruling and teaching authority, exercised and acknowledged, of the successor of St. Peter in the See of Rome?

And what has happened to those unfortunate parts of the Christian world which renounced allegiance to St. Peter's successors?

*“*Confirm*”: The Greek verb here used comes from the word “*sterigx*,” a support, a prop, a stay.

** “*The kingdom of heaven*”: The familiar way Our Saviour often spoke of His Church on earth (cf. Matt, xiii., 24, 31, 47). “*The keys*”: A Hebrew metaphor for supreme authority (cf. Isai., xxii, 22, and Rev., i., 17-18).

We know the awful results of the Protestant revolt of the 16th century. First, liberty; wild, hilarious liberty. Then, divisions; fierce, irreconcilable divisions. Then, rapid disintegration, and a whittling away of all traditional Catholic truth, a process continuing to-day in spite of fervent aspirations towards reunion. Apart from the rock-foundation of Peter, the Protestant bodies or their distinctive tenets have resolved in crumbling ruins: Satan has sifted them as wheat is sifted. Unity has long been lost; is, indeed, admittedly impossible, according to the fundamental Protestant principle of free-thought. And with unity, truth. Their differences proclaim the fact, as well as their common boast of being “fellow-searchers after truth.”

Fellow-searchers after truth! It is a painful experience for Catholics, disappointing, at times exasperating, to see so many earnest men and women groping for the Light, seeking here, there and everywhere, sampling every other type of religious teaching, dabbling in every innovation, mystic and mysterious, but studiously avoiding the greatest and most ancient Christian body, the only one of undisputed Apostolic descent and with unimpeachable claim to the title Catholic, the only one proclaiming its possession of the whole Deposit of Truth, which states its teaching fully, definitely and unambiguously, and proves each detail clearly, thoroughly and convincingly. Time was when no self-arrogating rival challenged the authority of the Catholic Church; when the Faith was universal throughout Christendom; when the thought of different “churches” teaching independently and with contradictory voices and changing their creeds with the times would have struck the average man as absurdly funny; he would have thought it impossible, or, at least, indefensible; he would have recognised it for what it is, a blasphemous travesty of Our Saviour’s work, the devil’s handiwork; he would have said, with obvious logic, as God is one and Truth is one, there can be but one true Church. Yet this great Catholic Church, which ruled alone a thousand years before the so-called Reformation, which holds today the proud allegiance of over three hundred millions, is simply overlooked by so many who undoubtedly are sincerely endeavouring to serve God faithfully. They pass it by as beneath consideration, never suspecting the vast sacramental treasures it cherishes, and the joy, the pride, the peace, of the children. of light. It is a prejudice begotten of four centuries of misstatement and misrepresentation. They have ears to hear, yet hear not the voice of Christ foretelling the one great visible mark of His Church, its unity. They have eyes to see, yet see not before their eyes that perfect unity which is at once the answer to His prayer and the fulfilment of His prophecy.

Nihil obstat:
J. DONOVAN,
Censor Deputatus.

Imprimatur
✠ D. MANNIX,
Archiepiscopus Melbournensis.
