

A Comment on Canon Purdy's Paper, "Growing Together"

Sunday, September 5th, 1971

As I listened to and reflected upon our theological discussions at Venice a certain disquiet settled in my mind. This tended to deepen rather than lessen as I heard certain issues singled out and stressed, without further qualifications, as 'matters of religious conviction'. I am very glad, of course, that the Commission has succeeded in isolating important themes of theological convergence and divergence, but, in such a confluence of intelligence, I should not expect less. I should like to raise the question, however, whether we have paid sufficient attention to the sociological implications of what we claim we have discovered. Or even when we seem to have reached a reasonable, substantial consensus on an important 'matter of faith', as we did yesterday, what do we mean in sociological terms? How much, if any, consensus of the faithful lies behind our own agreements? Do they even think it terms which we use, or regard as important those issues which we isolate? The didacticism of the answer which merely asserts that they do, or should, seems to be wholly inadequate.

There could be some danger that, as theologians, we might conceive of a theological agreement as in some sense sufficient for unity, a merely notional agreement which, on inspection and at its commendation, would, in its non-acceptance disclose its purely ideational character.

I have taken much heart, therefore, from Canon Purdy's remarks at the head of page 6:

"We ought to know more, more exactly, about the complex, perhaps explosive material we are handling when we set out to bring two Churches (not two sets of ideas) together."

There are many questions about 'what' and 'how' Anglicans and Roman Catholics think, believe, and witness to which I do not know the answer, but to which some of us must really know, if not the answer, at least the character of the situation, before we commend, in hope, our own work to the proper authorities for action within the Churches. I foresee, in the 93 countries of the world in which Anglicans and Roman Catholics live together, an immense work of education, even re-education. It will not be sufficient to suppose that a consensus arrived at in Windsor or Venice, Canterbury or Rome, will receive general acceptance unless it is translated into terms which the people of God find relevant to their own experience as men and women being made new in Christ. So often, they know, that matters professed as "religious convictions vital to our Faith" have been divisive issues used to conceal differences of temperament, nationality, cultural tradition, even psychological constitution, and mask in reality a sincere, if inarticulate, personal hostility and unwillingness to accept the moral necessity of renewal and relationship.

Theological discussions, in my view, tend sometimes, both in their content and manner, to isolate us from our neighbor, to whom, I am sure, we have no wish to limit our responsibility. I believe that some sociological research could greatly assist the fulfillment of this responsibility.

"To grow together into full organic unity"! At this stage I do not know what this means, but I am not prepared to cease to be an Anglican for anything less.

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