Ecumenical Catholicity, by Otto Karrer, translated by Gerard Farley

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Translators Note

The attached translation of an article by Otto Karrer on ecumenism first appeared in the German Journal Hochland in 1959.

The translation was published in Cross Currents.

Father Karrer was an outstanding ecumenist. At various times he was a Lutheran pastor, Diocesan priest, and member of the Society of Jesus.

The article is still quite relevant – rich in theoretical and practical insights.

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ECUMENICAL CATHOLICITY

IN HIS BOOK, Insights, Martin Buber writes: What weight do all misguided discussions on God's essence and operations have when contrasted with the one truth that all men, who have addressed God, have the same God in mind? Let us carry this thought over to historic Christianity: How significant are the plurality and division when contrasted with the one truth that all who have been called by Christ in faith have Him in mind? The ecumenical meetings and endeavors made by Protestants and Catholics have reminded us that in spite of the deep differences that exist among Christians, they all want to be loyal to the same truth (L. Newbigin).

Divisive differences no longer arise from the old controversial questions concerning the justification of man (the grace of God before and in all human endeavors), nor from questions concerning the relation between Scripture and Tradition (the apostolic revelation stated in Holy Scripture as the fundamental norm of all later revelations, and of all legitimate expressions of ecclesiastical life). Neither do they lie in the inner relation between faith and sacrament, in regard to the Eucharist as participating in the One Sacrifice of Jesus Christ, and bearing the imprint of the transfigured Lord (as "substance" under the sacramental veils), nor in the ordering of the spirit to a proper authority, of the community to its pastor. Within recent decades, by means of research in biblical theology, and as a result of ecumenical declarations, all these questions have led, on the Protestant side, to a re-examination of old positions, and to a positive evaluation of Catholic doctrine—and simultaneously, to a rectification of our corresponding counter-Reformation attitudes. The divisive factor in ecclesiastical life today is rooted in the question: what is the Church?

TN THE FIRST PLACE we should mention the idea of the Church prevalent in Eastern Orthodoxy. The "sobornost," the fraternal solidarity of the independent episcopal churches, regards unity as a mystical ideal without a divinely placed center in the Papacy. In itself, this mystical magnetism would appear as a type of bridge between the Roman Catholic and the Protestant ideas of the Church; it falls short, however, of biblical unity. "Each of these churches is a replica of the others, and in regard to its divine prerogatives, each is as much 'the complete Church' as all taken together; each is equal to the other, each independent and fully endowed with powers of the Spirit. All of this, however, rests upon a denial of a Church divinely founded and commissioned, a divinely organized totality. And this is a position unknown to Holy Scripture" (Newman).
A second explanation of ecclesiastical unity starts with historical separations and seeks to reconcile itself with given conditions. It makes a virtue out of necessity, a type of ideal position wherein one either escapes from historical forms to "an invisible church of love" or into the dilemma of a church composed of many similar branches. The "invisible Church" is no longer maintained by theologians who believe in the authenticity of the Bible. The "branch theory," developed by Anglican theologians in the last century, was rejected by Leo XIII and again by Pius XI. The Anglicans themselves now take a somewhat more sober view of it. Newbigin says: "The unity of the Church is not a union with friends chosen by us; it is, rather, the Unity specified by Christ Himself. For this reason I can view the image of unity in the sense of a confederation only as an error . . . for it offers unity without repentance."

The idea which the Anglo-Saxon wing of world ecumenism has in mind today represents an essential step ahead when contrasted with this happily optimistic dream of a federal Church: "Catholicity from the (historically formed) fragments of the apostolic tradition" is what W. Nichols calls it. According to this view, the Church of the apostles has suffered severe historical disturbances. Instead of a Catholica we have a battlefield made up of a huge Christian arena, in which differing and mutually-estranged groups of men build their divided chapels or pavilions out of the relics of a Holy Cathedral. "Christ in His totality is hidden (latent) in each church fragment and only in a united church will he be revealed (patent)," says O. Tomkins.

Whether influenced by these writings or not, the fact remains that Protestant theologians in Germany are very close to this basic position in their most recent writings. We are concerned with several important movements inspired by a desire for unity among the churches, which, in contrast with world ecumenism, views discussions with Roman Catholics as the most pressing task of Christian consciousness in our country. They have banded into the "Michaelsbruderschaft" and in the "Sammlung," and have produced a whole series of works with the object of community: Credo ecclesiam (1955), Die Katholizität der Kirche (1957) and Katholische Reformation (1958). The two groups led by K. B. Ritter, W. Stählin and H. Asmussen with their lay and theologian friends, though numerically small, represent a leaven within German Protestantism. They do not consider the conditions of union with Rome as given; rather they hold that since the convulsion of the Reformation, and by means of the consciousness initiated at the Council of Trent, the Catholic Church has risen above the negative polemic in which the Reformation was enmeshed. These serious attitudes towards the present appearance of the papal Church have not been unmeaning for theologians of Ecumenical Catholicity—rather they voice a Protestant self-probing and an invitation for a corresponding penitential preparation in the Catholic Church. Surely, it is our responsibility to listen to this invitation.

The editors of the writings I have mentioned did not expect complete agreement from the Catholic side. But the statement from an influential place that it was the old "branch-theory" came as a surprise to them. The preface of Asmussen and Stählin to the book The Catholicity of the Church was used as evidence for this interpretation. "We believe that the divided members of the One Holy Catholic and Apostolic Church are being moved towards each other not only through their diaspora existence in a non-Christian
world, but also through their own inner history. The future of the whole Christian church cannot be thought of without a renewed and deepened relationship between the divided church bodies." Then there is Stählin's statement at the beginning of his article: "The proper relationship of the divided churches, especially of the two great branches of western Christendom, is a vital question not only for the Christian church itself . . . but also for the preservation and care of the total inheritance which we in Europe and the entire West have to administer." Does the idea of a federated church lie in these words? The authors speak of "Christian churches" as is the custom in modern phraseology; the interpretation of this phrase depends upon the total context wherein it is found. A very well-known Catholic theologian speaks of "the mysterious rent which has separated the Church for centuries," but it would be hard for anyone reading it in context to interpret this as "the branch-theory." These writers are not speaking, in an abstract world of ideas, of the various parts whose sum would for the first time constitute the whole Church. They do not speak of a tree with many branches, whose very plurality belongs to the life and fruitfulness of the Church. They are, rather, talking about something entirely different—of the notorious fact that Christianity is split in its historical development. Subscribers to the "branch-theory" are reassured by this fact. The prophets of Ecumenical Catholicity are deeply disturbed by it, because this historical reality contradicts the idea and mission of the Church, and they are, consequently, calling loudly for a consideration of Unity. I felt obliged to ask the writers themselves—one orally, the other in writing, about their attitudes. Asmussen said: "a gross misunderstanding!" Stählin wrote me: "If you understand by the 'branch-theory' that the differing church bodies are related to each other as are the branches of a tree, I do not share this concept at all and I cannot understand how anyone could come to the conclusion that I do. At the same time I would not contest the fact that this theory has a kernel of truth in it; however, it cannot express the awareness of culpable division and of passionate responsibility for the unity of the Church." Thus the discussion is about the empirically culpable origin and presence of a divided church and not of the proper variety of development within the One Church. Furthermore we are not speaking of the Church as an abstract concept; we speak of it rather in its historical existence. Christ lives in the history of His body; the Church is made up of men in space and time—of men who are sinners, but who through the Spirit of Christ and the gifts of grace are made holy. For centuries now the crime of division lies over all Christianity. It is this that the authors of Ecumenical Catholicity are talking about. They have gained from us the impression that we, forced by historical awareness, are ready to acknowledge a co-culpability for the emergence of the split, but that we have not drawn the \textit{de facto} conclusions from it. Instead, in our self-assurance of being the true children of Abraham, we have expected reflection and repentance only from others, without reviewing our part in the affair. In a discussion in Richard Bauman's \textit{Rock of the World}, K. B. Ritter (certainly no enemy of the Catholic Church) says that the situation is apparently not hopeless, because the Catholic Church explains itself as essentially an apostolic authority. The only question is: "How does this apostolic authority understand itself? Does it regard its spiritual authority as given once and for all (unconditionally) and total-
ly at its disposition, or as bound to the resurrected Lord and His Spirit? Does it realize that an authority is recognized in the measure to which it exercises itself in sacrificial service to the gospel and in the spirit of love, and is it thus prepared at any time to be called back to obedience to Christ? The dogmatic difference between Protestant and Roman theology is, according to Protestants, that what constitutes Divine Law in the Church is not free from biblical criticism and thus from self-examination and penitence."

Here we are actually at the core of the church question. But before we go into the question of the promise, and the problem of authority and its spiritual application, a reflection on the historical reasons for the split is necessary. ("Knowledge of the different confessions must always be historically oriented," says H. Jedin.) An obscuration of the biblical idea of the Church arose through lack of clarity concerning the extent and limits of the Reformation, as well as through the overall disruption of spiritual authority and the worldliness of the Renaissance papacy. The call for a council should have been made; that it was not made in the ensuing years was largely due to the hesitation of the Roman curia. Had it not hesitated so long through fear of unwanted reforms enforced by a council, everything would have taken a different turn (at least as far as human reckoning goes) and there would have been no split. The later refusal of the Protestants to respond to the bull calling them to the council of Trent in 1537 was, in view of the divided purposes of the Protestant theologians, "a political decision carried out by princes and magistrates" (Jedin). The division thus set a precedent which speaks harshly for the members of the Kingdom of God. Quite simply there was a growth away from each other, and all who followed inherited this tradition. On one side was the Catholic tradition and on the other the Protestant, and people were members of one or the other because they were so born and raised. In other words, the historical separation and division of Christianity by political powers into two different life-streams did not result in the same Christian content remaining un tarnished in both of them. Objectively speaking the fullness of Christian being is present only in the Church which preserves the authority of the bishops and of the papacy. It is, however, also true that Protestant Christianity carries with it from its origins the well-springs of life, whose spirit is that of the One Church.

We must work for only one thing: that is, to heal the broken unity through mutual reflection on the apostolic inheritance, and to draw nearer to "perfect unity." If each confession wanted to glorify its inheritance at the expense of the others, it would amount to a deepening of unrest and would mean not listening to Christ. It is both true ful and in conformity with the command of the Lord to recognize the historically continuing division as involving mutual guilt, and in the spirit of Christian repentence "to avoid everything which can reasonably offend the other," (P. Ch. Boyer, Rome) and, for the sake of Christ, to do all that can be done for unity. The representatives of Ecumenical Catholicity have given me personally a deep impression of their moral and theological work for unity—and indeed precisely in relation to the crucial position of the Church, the apostolic succession of the See of Peter. But they do not expect us to act like the "holy possessors," as if we had nothing to contribute, as if we were a pure likeness of the apostolic church.
In regard to the succession to authority, the New Testament uses its familiar words for office (arché and exousia), evidently because of their conceptual proximity to "lordship" or "power of disposal" when it is speaking of the political realm and the realm of the synagogue. They are never used in an ecclesiastical sense. In this context the word diakonia is used, i.e. service to the people of God in responsibility to the Lord and in the spirit of brotherhood. On this point both Catholic and Protestant exegetes are unanimous. With this purpose in mind the apostles appointed "shepherds" to the communities who, in their turn, could pass on their particular responsibilities to worthy men of good reputation, or even to worthy men proposed by the community. Those men who had been installed by others, through the holy signs of the laying on of hands and the call of the spirit, were then called "those established by the Holy Spirit," and so form "from the very beginning, for all time, the connecting links which come from eternity into time" (K. H. Schelkle). The liturgical prayers of consecration in both the West and the East show that the post-apostolic church was well aware of this idea of "holy authority." It was not buried in the following centuries, but rather was hampered by severe mystifications and disfigurements, since both Constantine and Charlemagne took over the office of "protector." As a result of the symbiosis with the secular power, the consciousness of "lordship" came more and more to the fore. In the ninth and tenth centuries the apostolic office became a football of feudalism; in the twelfth to fourteenth centuries it became an almost totalitarian power, and in the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries it became a chaos through the Western Schism. It was shaken by the Reformation in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries and then caught up in renewals and litigations until the Vatican and post-Vatican discussions over the relationship of the primate to the episcopate under the aegis of curial centralism. So far as the valuation of the papacy was concerned, the Reformation was a revolution which sought refuge from a desperate situation in German corporate law. According to the characterization made by a Lutheran ecclesiastical jurist, what remained were "functional sees without orders (ordo)." Instead of the intended union with the ancient church, there was a union with the authority of the provincial princes, and instead of the spiritual fatherhood and sonship between Paul and Timothy, between the consecrator and the consecrated, the creed took on an entirely new educative meaning, detached from the personal tradition. The biblical way is the personal transmission of the responsible service of the shepherd. God has taken men into His service. The Lord says to his apostles: "He who hears you, hears Me." Paul writes to Timothy: "Protect the good entrusted to you by the Holy Spirit and give it to the keeping of men you can trust who are assigned the task of teaching it to others." The Lutheran theologian H. Asmussen says, "Under this aspect the position of the reformers does not attain the truth of the ancient biblical church because it dissolves the position of bearer of ecclesiastical authority." They believed that there was a succession of credos and that this alone sufficed for succession.

Let us turn to what is truly worth considering in the recent history of Protestant theology; something visible in the few passages quoted above. Thanks to intensified biblical studies (Kittel-Friedrich's theological dictionary forms a testimony which has no counterpart on the Catholic side); thanks to
the fraternal meetings of Protestant theologians with Anglican and Eastern Orthodox colleagues in the World Council of Churches and with their Catholic colleagues in *Una Sancta*, a mellowing of the old lines of opposition concerning apostolic succession has begun which promises to be of the greatest significance for further developments. A few examples: L. Newbigin, bishop of the Church of South-India, writes in *The Household of God* that as far as the "Catholic" wing of the *Oekumene* is concerned, the bishop's authority belongs to the very essence of the church and as far as the Protestant wing is concerned, it is of "high worth." This concession rests on Protestant premises. Nevertheless, it is recognized that reunification is a command of the Lord, and that the apostolic tradition of the East-West Church has more weight than the separation in the sixteenth century, understandable in the situation, but unendurable permanently. A Lutheran like Edmund Schlink finds apostolic succession desirable, Ethelbert Stauffer sees that the succession to the office of bishop is within the framework of the Gospel, and Werner Elert asserts that the liturgical and sacramental celebrations presuppose the supervision of the episcopate. Even the reform theologian, J. J. von Allmen, professes that apostolic succession is the very essence of the ordering principle proper to the Church. In his introduction to the French edition of Gregory Dix's significant work, *Le ministère dans l'Église*, (1955), he writes: "The full valuation of the office of pastor is the first ecumenical problem. To evade it is to evade union itself. Corresponding to the threefold office of Christ as Preacher, Priest and Pastor, the life of the Church is based on faith, the administration of the sacraments and the direction of the flock. To deny this would be to deprive the Lord of part of His Body." The validity of the consecration to authority is put in question if the apostolic succession is denied. With the same intention, the representatives of Ecumenical Catholicity have set for themselves the goal of becoming theologically acclimatized to thoughts of a return to an apostolic order native both to the Bible and the ancient church. They have "a new consciousness of the powers which have been given to the spiritual authority," says H. D. Wendland. "It has cost the Protestant church unspeakable effort to this very day to free itself from perverting contradictions, and to recognize the mixture of spiritual inequality with spiritual equality to which the Church of the apostles testifies in the writings of the New Testament." According to H. Asmussen, "It remains a serious question whether the orders given from dire necessity in the Reformation have ever emerged from the stage of provisionality... One cannot raise 'dire need' to the level of a principle. Once more it must be asked how succession in the Church is to be viewed in its earthly definition... The authority of directing the Church cannot be self-established; neither can it be established by official actions. Ordination is a pneumatic power, the point at which the *pneuma* affects the succession. Consequently the power of ordination can be imparted only in a sacred service."

Naturally a few questions still require clarification. An ever-recurring concern of our Protestant brothers is the apparent formalism of the line of succession, the automatic mechanism of succession to office. What Karl Barth writes in his *Church Dogmatics* is highly interesting: "The idea of succession in the ancient church could be justified (as the knowledge of the co-dwelling of Christ and the Church), and in respect to the 'thatness' of it, no objections can
be made; objections can be made only to the 'how' of it—and even in this respect no fundamental objection on our side can be raised against the conception of the 'apostolate in Peter,' nor against the possibility of a primate in the Church. Protest is raised only against the contention that the highest power (from the apostles and from the first Peter) proceeded automatically to each succeeding Roman bishop, as if the succession could be viewed as other than pneumatic or, to put it more precisely, as though the pneumatic could be reduced to the secular actuality of a list of bishops."

The objection to the mechanism of succession, it appears to us, deals basically with the administration of the sacraments, and is based on the misunderstanding that according to Catholic doctrine, the opus operatum, the outer thing or act, is efficacious in itself alone. In truth, considered in themselves, the consecration to office, baptism, the consecration of the bread and wine and the forgiveness of sins, are not efficacious without faith on the human side as a disposition for the consecration by the Holy Ghost. Thus men are simply, as St. Augustine explains, instruments for the invisible gift. Consequently, although the higher powers are in a spatio-temporal dimension, since it is a man who is doing the ordaining (baptizing, consecrating, forgiving, etc.), nevertheless their basis is not so much the holiness of the human framework, or the historically-determined line of succession of the act of consecration back to the time of the apostles, as it is the operation of the Holy Ghost Who transcends both time and space. Even though severe spiritual abuses occurred in the feudal society of former centuries, even though illicitly-consecrated individuals were forced into the Church by the secular power, even though Popes (justly or unjustly) were deposed—no theologian maintains that the original link has been cut off by men, and that the continuity of the grace-giving Spirit has been broken. Although Donatists and others made the "holiness" of the person concerned the condition for valid consecration, it is interesting to notice that the Augsburg Confession kept aloof from this view, since "the sacraments and the Word are made efficacious through the appointment of Christ even when they are handled by evil persons."

As far as lists of bishops are concerned, they are no more to ecclesiastical life than a family history is for the life of a family.

The position of the Protestants, however, goes deeper and should be taken seriously by us. Stählin says: "Certainly the unity of the Church is enclosed in its historical continuity, and this continuity on the horizontal level is subordinated on the vertical level to the operations of the supernatural First Cause. What is questionable is the self-assurance in the administration of the deposit of grace, the impression of having Christ's presence at one's disposal. Is any promise given unconditionally, is it not always bound to obedience to the word and spirit of Christ?" This is the serious worry that moves sincere friends of ecumenism like Peter Brunner or Ernst Kinder. "The traditions in the Church," says Kinder, "have a tendency to absolutize themselves and to emancipate themselves from their functional relationship to the Bible... as though they had an exclusive lease on God's saving powers." Our response is: Never will there be a perfect guarantee against the abuse of what is holy. The teachings of Holy Scripture and the history of the Church are very clear on what attitudes can be taken to avoid severe failures and scandals: there is always the free word of the prophets and
obligatory fraternal admonishments (involving at times the admonishment of a superior in rank by an inferior) and in extreme cases the holy right and duty of opposition to the scandals of a superior. Thomas Aquinas praises Paul for his opposition to the dangerous position of the first apostle concerning the sharing of meals between Jewish and gentile converts. Can a consecrated person then be spoken of as having the deposit of grace at his disposal? Foolish and misleading words can provide the occasion for such an interpretation—I myself have heard some. The doctrines of faith, however, should not be measured by the inaccuracies of a preacher or the lightly-considered formulations of a journalist. I think that Protestant theologians do not doubt the objectively given power of a spiritual authority. The power “to bind and to loose,” is promised and given by God; otherwise all talk about responsible services by the Church would be senseless. This is not to say, however, that man can dispose of this divine gift according to caprice. This authority must be understood in the spirit of Christ, in the spirit of love. It would be sinful for man to act high-handedly and the saying that “all sin avenges itself on earth” holds equally for the Church.

It is well said by Karl Rahner: “The promise that the gates of hell will never prevail against the Church does not mean the promise of a strength and safety that is always tangible for us; it is, rather, the promise of the power, which is God’s alone, on behalf of the weak and constantly threatened men who form the Church. The men in the Church may well feel assured that ‘nothing can really happen to the Church’ because time and again nothing has happened to the Church which is in God’s hands despite the men who lazily or fearfully (we add—arrogantly) have abandoned Her.”

Now it appears that Rahner himself raises a question in another article when he places the spiritual power in an easily misleading proximity with an unconditional “disposability,” and just at the point where the powers of the Church are concentrated in the Papacy. He first says what is evident: “Only a totalitarian, not a Pope, could regard the free charisma in the church through the action of the Holy Spirit as a diminution, or a danger to perennial authority; and this is valid especially when a charismatic bishop, in the name of Christ, leads to pasture the flock which Christ has entrusted to him.” Later on, in respect to the full powers of the Pope, he says: “To a certain extent, the proper limitation—that is, a limitation factually proportioned (i.e. through positive human ecclesiastical law)—to the events and to the time of the spiritual situation, is something that cannot be constitutionally regulated by strict material norms. There is no tangible evidence to show that the factual relation between the episcopate and the primate in the ecclesiastical jurisdiction of competency is correct and suitable. Only the governance of the Holy Spirit can see to it that this competition in practice . . . takes place in such a way that it works for what is best for the Church. When the relationship between the two powers is properly considered, there is no norm which precludes a Pope in practice from taking all power to himself in such a way that actually only the name of divine power remains for a bishop . . . for no earthly tests of an authoritative kind overrule the judgments of the Holy See; the highest competency belongs to the Pope and it does not give and cannot give a particular and ultimate right of opposition that the Church can concretely main-
tain. (Furthermore it is a right that the Church should not give because of the presence of the Holy Spirit promised to it.)" In a theological discussion Rahner clarified his view in the following way: "From the promise of the Spirit, we can infer that if a future Peter XX de facto wanted to transgress his spiritual authority in a serious matter, at that very moment he would suddenly die."

**NE CAN ONLY** be grateful that the question has been made so clear in respect to this crucial point. As our basic thought let us keep in mind the principle expressed in the following words of M. Pribilla: "The Spirit allows a good deal of room to human freedom. Christ, the wellspring, is never dry, but we men participate in His blessings only insofar as we make ourselves receptive to them. In this connection between divine and human factors it is basic that both the growth and decline of Christendom depend on human factors." Dietrich Bonhoeffer expresses it this way: "I do not believe that God is a timeless Fate; rather I believe that he awaits and answers sincere prayers and responsible actions." And H. Dombois: "Indeed all earthly tendencies have not killed the Church. What the Holy Spirit does through the epochs in the history of the Church, and what human effort achieves in obedience to His blessings are evidently incomparable; on the other hand it is equally clear that the protection and reawakening of the Church is not accomplished without our human effort. No guarantee can chain up the Holy Spirit, but we are asked to take in all seriousness the divine service, teaching and order. The question is: Does the Spirit act, in the case of transgressions of spiritual authority (as with Boniface VIII), as a sort of Deus ex Machina, or does God wish to utilize the pneumatic powers within the Church as a corrective against a threatening abso-

lutism? Since the authority of the bishop is based on no less a divine apostolic basis than the authority of Peter, does it not require some type of ecclesiastical judicial prerogative in order that it may fulfill its mission with full decisiveness? Is there not in the inspired New Testament a de facto approval of the opposition of the last apostle to a dangerous measure by the first apostle? Do the bishops only represent the Pope, and not rather the "college of apostles"? Has this (the college of bishops) its power from the Pope, or rather from Christ? And does not the Church stand by the power of divine law which, antecedent to Church law, is based solely on the "apostles" and on "the prophets"? Jesus prayed for Peter that he should strengthen the brethren, and when he refused in Antioch, Brother Paul knew himself called by the Spirit to give his admonition with full apostolic power. If, in the hypothetical case presented by Rahner, the bishops feel themselves bound in duty to act, would a Pope then be valid as the bearer of the Holy Spirit who wished to oppose both the episcopate and the people of the Church, and thus place the Church in a position where there was nothing left but to await a miracle?

I confess myself deeply impressed by the confident assurance of Rahner's statement that the direction of the Church by the Holy Ghost is ultimately not an affair of human guarantees and the assurances of ecclesiastical law, but that it derives from a divine promise. We are in accord on this. What it seems important to me to emphasize is the means, closely associated to faith, in which the divine Spirit actualizes His promise in history through human instruments, and how a refusal of co-responsibility towards God's counsel brings about sickness for the members of the historical Church.
On the historical plane the Spirit's promise of God's fidelity is actually not effectual independent of devotion to the faith by those elected to it and responsible for it; it is, rather, conditioned by their faithfulness to the Spirit of Christ. We are fundamentally in accord with the representatives of Ecumenical Catholicity on this decisive question which they have placed before us. Only, perhaps, we do not consider it as seriously as it should be considered. Certainly Paul says in his Epistle to the Romans that the promises of the spirit cannot be simply annulled by human infidelity, but they can be limited by a "holy delay" for a while (for a thousand years, which are only a day in the sight of God). What a darkening of the saving mission of the Church was indicated by the pretensions of the medieval hierarchy, especially when they were cloaked with an appeal to sacred scripture! And does the neglect of the eucharistic service through the centuries mean anything other than a shocking loss of religious substance for the spiritual nourishment of the flock of Christ, a loss of substance that weighed not only on the flock but on the shepherds themselves, because people permitted themselves all too easily to be satisfied with an unconditional promise! Did not the Reformation itself occur because the co-responsibility of the episcopate for the conduct of the Roman curia in serious matters was no longer taken seriously? And in regard to the split itself, Newman wrote (to be sure as an Anglican, but later on even more professedly as a Catholic) these serious lines:

If we have anything to learn from the history of Judaism, it is not improbable that the Christian Church has forfeited a portion of the promises; but we shall find, I think, in the New Testament that the promises made to her actually did depend in part upon a condition which now for many centuries she (as the totality of those validly baptized) has broken. This condition is Unity, which Christ and his Apostles made to some extent the sacramental channel through which all the gifts of the Spirit, and among them purity of doctrine, were secured to the Church.4

We must regard these considerations, based on the historical predicament of the Church, even more closely and speak concretely in order to avoid vagueness. Let us assume that our Catholic co-responsibility for the split, brought about by mutual fault of our fathers and perpetuated by ourselves, was taken seriously not only by theologians and active lay groups, but also by the bishops, especially the bishops (not unimportant for the collective Church) of the confessionally mixed countries. And let us further assume that while looking towards a papal definition, we faced the question whether we and the pastors of the Church, in the presence of the guilt-laden predicament of Christianity, must not concern ourselves, before everything else, with the unity of the divided Christian community. The question involves the Church as a whole, especially the bishops, and not only the see of Peter, which according to the express declaration of the Vatican must be asked if it has a final decision. Now I think that the question is not once and for all a clear-cut theological question; rather I think it presupposes an ethico-religious "pre-decision," whether the people of the Church and its responsible pastors want to meditate on concrete historical actualities, on the broken existence of the Christian community in the world. For the sake of Christ, in responsibility for the Kingdom of God, and for the moral worth of the Christian faith in the West and in its missions, such considerations must lead to the recognition that
nothing more important can happen for the Church as a whole. For Roman Catholic Christianity, the Council of Trent has striven for the unity that was possible in its historical time; it limited itself theologically to the most necessary current clarification of the controversial questions and consciously abstained from a dogmatic completion by its own power. Gradually the broad groups composing the Church's people hardly thought of their responsibility to Christendom as a whole; rarely did they think of the necessity for amendment (amendment seemed necessary only for personal sins). If the Church in itself is spoken of as a kind of abstract idea, then it is the one true Church insofar as it unites in itself all the essential marks and characteristics, and insofar as it conducts itself with the fullness of all its powers. This is theologically incontestable. But can one neglect the historically empirical reality which is revealed by the separate growth of a "conservative Catholic" and a "reform Catholic" wing of Christendom, the one with a culpable retardation of readiness for reform, the other with culpable of "revolutionizing" the reform, yet neither of them finally wanting separation even though they are compelled to separate politically? Can one convinced of the correct idea of the Church's completeness and integrity in its very essence, then act as if the Church did not live at all in history, and as if "the completed Church" could forego its moral co-responsibility for the split, and its religious duty to heal this split, before it does anything else? The question is not theological; the theological truth of dogmatic propositions is not under discussion. Neither is it an opportunity to dogmatize; more widely and relevantly than the secular word "opportunity" permits us to suppose, it deals with an ethico-religious responsibility. Should we in this culpable existence of historical division take up the spirit of Jesus Christ as a self-evident privilege for our own special ecclesiastical development? Can we do this while we evade the moral "pre-decision," or have forgotten it in becoming accustomed to the situation? It is historically understandable that at the moment this type of question lies far from the sight of such church circles as those, for instance, in South America, who, without giving serious thought to their ecclesiastical existence in Christ, and the most pressing missionary tasks within their own countries, prefer to specialize even further their Marian cult. "How very much exaggerations of a falsely understood Mariology can deteriorate genuine Catholic thought," a leading Catholic theologian wrote me in this regard.

The Papacy within the circle of the apostles and the continuity of this structure is nearly as well attested in Scripture and the ancient Church as is the Church itself. The basic proofs for Catholicism have impressed many Protestants. Also the advertence of K. Hofstetter and others to early Christian witnesses of the replacement of Jerusalem by Rome as the Mother-Church and the chief location of the total Church are justly noticed. But the authority of Peter in the ancient Church cannot be easily compared with our present papal authority, and Catholic theologians such as B. Bootmann, P. Benoit, O. Rousseau and the friends of the highly respected P. Couturier cannot help but admit this. Developments understood pneumatically but not organically are grounded in the very historical existence of the Church; but so few developments in the Faith and ecclesiastical life can be fundamentally thrown into question that we shall have to measure these and any other results coming from them by the standard of Scripture,
by the prototype of the ancient Church, and by the overall spirit exhibited by them. The gradations of responsibilities, the relationship of the apostolate to the testimonial of the Spirit, of the episcopate to the primate, is essential for the Church. Autocratic tendencies are temptations and are thus not in the spirit of Christ. "No single one can want to be all; only all can be all, and the unity that of a totality," says Moehler in a classic phrase. Believing that he was making the essence and greatness of the Church more familiar to Field-marshal Montgomery, the English convert Arnold Lunn said: "You see, the Catholic Church is like the Eighth Army; it has its discipline and its leaders." He may have considered such an image modern and purposeful—but measured by the apostolic Church it gives a distorted image of the authority and mystery of the Church. If such images were to become more widespread, we should be very grateful for an inhibiting ecumenical partnership.

The significance of ecumenical partnership for the development of modern theology and the care of souls cannot be hidden from anyone in our day. Many evangelical theologians give us an example of their love of unity by re-examining their own position. We should not expect everything from them without laying some bricks of our own on the road to reunification. I say "we," not only "the Roman Catholics" or the Pope, for on the deepest level we are united in guilt and grace. Being ready to heal the broken unity of Christians in accord with Christ's serious command is identical with reflection and atonement for all those taking part in it.

The first thing that honest ecumenical amendment involves is the acknowledgment that our separated fellow Christians are brothers in Christ, thanks to the grace of God and Holy Baptism, the power of God's Word in them, and finally to the presence and activity of the Holy Ghost in their midst; acknowledgment of their love (given by faith) of Holy Scripture and especially acknowledgment of the truly Christian life, not of all, but of many in their love of God and neighbor with their whole hearts; acknowledgment of their efforts towards unity, not always as one might think solely with Protestants, but also in fraternal dialogue with the Catholic communities that have joined the dialogue. All this we know from experience, and we testify to it with great joy. Our best theologians and spiritual directors have Protestant friends who have no desire to lure them from their position or from their work for the Kingdom of God.

Secondly, in regard to ecumenical reflection, there is the need to become prepared to learn from each other in mutual helpfulness for the Kingdom of God. The Council of Trent adopted many of the Protestant options of its time; present-day theologians learn much from Karl Barth, O. Cullmann and other Protestant exegetes. It would certainly not be detracting from Catholic truth to point out that the realization of certain values in the life of the Church came into being only as a result of the encounter with our Protestant fellow-Christians. The justification of sinful man through God's grace is not closely connected in the Protestant realm with the sacramental life; on the other hand it might be said that the belief in justification as good Protestants experience it, cut free from the battle against "works," has nothing un-Catholic about it. Rather it discloses a personal immediacy to God which brings great simplicity and purposeful direction towards what is truly necessary—a simplicity and purposeful direction that cannot be replaced by theological knowl-
edge or through many devotions. After getting over the first surprise it was a great joy to me when Rudolph Otto answered my query as to what was essentially Protestant in this way: "Justification by faith." I then said to him: "If this is truly the decisive point, then many of us are good Protestants and many of you are good Catholics." St. Thomas Aquinas teaches: "Not on the moral (the fulfillment of the law) does the confidence in justification lie, but in faith alone. We believe that man is justified (participates as a child of God) by faith without performing works of the Law." In this regard Lyonnet observes: "With St. Paul what is contrasted is all moral activity on one side and faith (in the grace of God) on the other", and according to an explanation given by H. Küng that means: "the confident yielding of the self to God's grace as a response to God's action."

Another thing that we can learn is the Protestant valuation of Holy Scripture as the normative basis of revelation and piety. We could certainly learn this theology from the Church Fathers and from the example of many saints such as the little St. Theresa; our discourse however with our contemporaries means—thanks to the questions they put to us—a wholesome needling. Biblical studies play a somewhat modest role in the present-day education of our theologians, and this is also true—prescinding from the Bible Institute—for Roman institutions as well. In the homes of Protestant pastors I found a custom which says far more than many discussions: in the morning before breakfast the father of the house reads a short excerpt from Holy Scripture and then a daily excerpt of the Roman mass from the missal as an inspiration for the labors of the day. I could think of nothing more beautiful for Catholic homes since only a few can initiate the day's work with Holy Mass.

The following example should show that our Protestant fellow-Christians can teach us much about the Christocentric applications of our theology and piety which is truly Catholic, but which at times is not too clearly discernable. The English Catholic journalist Michel de la Bedoyere writes from his life and observations that his religious instruction within his circle had been heavily loaded with catechetical concepts, moral definitions, and rules for devotions and asceticism. It had also been characterized for many others by a strange hunger for prophecies, the visions of children, stigmata, etc. And so he spent decades missing the forest for the trees until he discovered how great and simple Christ's message is, since it reveals to us what God is to men and that we, in Christ, are the New Man. It is sad that Protestants have lost the meaning of the veneration of saints and above all of the Holy Mother of God; but to a large extent this is a reaction to an overemphasis in practice on the part of Catholics—an overemphasis which, in those countries barely touched by biblical instructions, has tended to a certain displacement of the Christocentric character of Catholicism.

From the foregoing it would follow that the increasing proximity of many Protestant theologians to Catholic truths which had previously been lost should be answered on our side by "not only a sympathetic, but also by a concrete search for what is valid in the reform positions." Varying Congar's inferences, Karl Rahner writes in his essay "On Conversion" that besides tendencies towards dissolution in contemporary Protestantism, there is not only much genuine Christian substance to be observed, but also "in a long history outside the Catholic Church, genuinely
Christian possibilities were actualized in theology, piety, the liturgy, the communal life and art... which have not been realized by us in the Catholic Church, although in themselves they belong to the actual fullness of the historical development of that which is Christian.” How much is lacking to us in Catholic Christianity because—for fear of the “Protestant spirit”—we fettered the genuine evangelical freedom of witness and self-responsibility in the realm of the spiritual life as it had not been fettered in the Patristic or the Medieval period! How Newman suffered over this! On the other hand what heavy losses and splinterings has Protestantism suffered and continues to suffer because she—to name the most decisive factor—let fall the authority of the apostolic office as the antithesis of the free testimony of the Spirit. The post-Reformation generations have been hindered in their receptivity to many Catholic truths; but they sincerely want to hold themselves to Christ's revelation, and, thus, in a formal sense, they are not heretics. Rather they are much more bound to Christ's Church by their membership in Him. This can be said in another way: “They are our fellow Christians and in all truth our comrades in faith with whom we know ourselves bound in the great decision which is posed to modern men everywhere: the choice between belief and disbelief” (W. H. van de Pol).

H. Schütter shows very penetratingly in his book On Reunification in Faith, what essentially Catholic doctrines are held by Protestant theologians and what decisively Protestant positions can find a just home in the Catholic Church. A spiritual testimonial of burning actuality for this consciousness is the Catholic Mission Yearbook of Switzerland, 1958. Protestant and Catholic Mission Societies have contributed to it with pictures and reports on lamentable disturbances in the past brought about by mutual enmity, and on the beginnings of consciousness about these things. The ecumenical movement had its beginning in the missions. The missionaries observed: “We must tread the path of rapprochement or the missions are lost. In the situation in which Communism has placed us in the missions, necessity compelled us divided Christians to draw together. It seems that in the fire of a common threat, God wants us to sweat together into the long sought unity.” To be sure, the concrete possibilities will bring severe problems with them for the missions at home, but for the sake of Christ, with good will they can and they must be solved.

Do ecumenical endeavors have any prospects of success? There cannot be a union with Protestantism for the simple reason that there is no such thing as “Protestantism.” There are only Protestantisms. And at the present the members of the Protestant Church hardly permit themselves to think of a deeper movement towards Catholic unity. Temporarily there are theological and religious inner circles who are in close prayerful and dialectical community with their Catholic brothers. But then the Catholic Church itself is not presently ready for a larger ecumenical movement. Newman's words: “It must now prepare itself just for converts,” apply to an even greater extent to the difficult preparation of the whole Church in regard to the responsibility for reunification through serious reflection or “repentance” (to use Bishop M. Besson's word). Nevertheless with God nothing is impossible. According to the testimony of those very close to him, Pius XI faced this problem seriously as a part of his purpose to renew all things in Christ. He was very much concerned as to how he could effect a reversal necessary for the sake of Christian unity,
from the high point of hierarchical centralism to the synthesis of love of the Church Fathers, and ultimately according to the original apostolic image. Humanly speaking, it is not probable that we shall realize such possibilities tomorrow or the day after, and thus approach Unity with the great Protestant bodies. Nevertheless this is the decision before which Christianity stands. But the majority does yet not understand how dangerous a refusal would be. The greatest dangers, says Karl Rahner, are those one does not notice and the most dangerous decision is the decision not to decide.

Is it too bold to hope and to strive for repentance in the ecumenical sphere? A counter-question: Is it not cowardly, and a sign of little faith not to hope and strive? Faith is a pledge for the human inability to see God. “Faith involves the courage to make a wager (J. H. Newman).” Faith in the meaning of Jesus is a surrender to the Kingdom of God that is always coming into time. Have not all the heroes of faith died without having experienced the fulfillment of the promise? If this is the case—and the Bible proclaims it—then slogans like “Utopia” have no justification. It would amount to saying that the apostolic Church itself is one of the never-to-be-discovered Utopias of history. We would then be refusing to adopt the apostolic ideal of the Church as the mirror by which to test our historical reality. This amounts to subjecting divine law, and the duty to be faithful to the structure of the apostolic church, to our own special claims. In this way we are telling Jesus Christ (sorrowfully to be sure, but in fact, that his Testament does not interest us and that we prefer to remain divided—since there is no way to Unity. We would rather sing our own text in the theological war than sing Christ’s praise. The first choir proclaims: “We Protestant Christians perpetuate the emergency methods of Luther and Calvin in order to keep out of the Pope’s snare.” The second choir: “We Catholics perpetuate the summit of the development which led us from the ‘Collegial-Petrine Church’ to the ‘Centralized-Petrine Church.’ ”

But perhaps we will probe ourselves seriously to discover whether Christ’s call for reflection at the beginning of His mission, and His prayer for unity as His last testimonial, can be as existential a question for us as it once was for the people of the promise.

Translated by Gerard Farley

FOOTNOTES

1 The Household of God. It goes without saying that a positive valuation of present religious opinions has nothing to do with a comparative study of differing religious groups.
3 Stimmen der Zeit, February 1958, p. 335 f.
4 From the Via Media, by Newman-Karrer, Die Kirche, II, p. 244 f. One should observe in this connection the “to some extent”—for naturally Newman’s belief also involves unconditional reliability on God’s faithfulness and promise. On the other hand he calls our attention to the fact that not only the individual Christian, but the Church as a whole in its every concrete expression of certain spiritual values, can be deficient in regard to the fullness of truth and love, which, even in the New Testament, is bound to a condition, and “that in the course of the centuries the life of the Church appears continually threatened” (Lortz).
5 Yet with Dom Hil. Marot one can find it deplorable that since the split between the East and the West, no one has taken the trouble to make the split more comprehensible to the thought of the divided groups. This holds equally well for the “forgetting” of the community in both guilt and grace and leaves us the task of making reparation for this deficiency in the ecumenical future. (See Istina, 1957/4).
7 Verlag Fredebeul & Koenen, Essen 1958.
8 Freiburg/Schweiz, Paulus-Druckerei.