

Monastic life and the path to unity

Seminar E 1

Introductory reflections

Glory be to the Father, and to the Son and to the Holy Spirit, as it was in the beginning, is now and ever shall be, world without end. Amen.

In this spirit of thanksgiving and praise, it is a great joy for me to welcome you to this seminar, your Grace, dear Mgr. Epiphanius of the Coptic Orthodox Church, Abbot of the monastery of St Macarius at Scete, dear Hiéromoine Melchizedek, of the Patriarchate of Constantinople, dear Hegumen Joseph of the Patriarchate of Moscow, dear Archimandrite Athanasius, of the Patriarchate in Bucharest, and dear Abbot Stuart, of the Church of England. Dear Father Abbots, Mother Abbesses and Father Priors.

Our seminar will be work in common, where I want to give as much space as possible to you, and especially to our guests, monks of our sister Churches. For this reason, my introduction will be short.

I will offer some suggestions around two main questions: 1. Where do we stand today? 2. What can we do today as monks?

A. Where are we now on the path to unity?

On the side of the Catholic Church, we can assess the situation using two documents that mark significant milestones on our path to Christian Unity. I want to talk about the Decree *Unitatis Redintegratio* of Vatican II and the Encyclical of the Pope Jean-Paul II, *Ut Unum Sint*. These are more than ever the lights on our way. In their light, we can place ourselves at the end of the 1960s and early 1970s, and regain the sense of urgency and a sense that a real full communion was possible. A simple list of names will highlight that commitment for the unity of the churches was a tangible reality. On the Catholic side: Pope John XXIII, Pope Paul VI, Cardinal Willebrands, Archbishop Duprey, Mgr Fortino, Dom Emmanuel Lanne, Father Tillard; on the Orthodox side: the Patriarch Athenagoras, the Metropolitan Meliton, the Metropolitan Nicodemus (Rotov), the Metropolitan (Zizioulas) of Pergamon, the Archpriest Vitalij Borovoj, Father John Meyendorf; on the Coptic side: the Pope Shenouda; on the Anglican side: Archbishop Ramsey, Henry Chadwick, Mary Tanner... and many others! Now, all these are dead, or have resigned their responsibility. For them, the unity of the Church was none other than the will of God, as it is expressed in the prayer of Jesus in John Chapter 17.

During all these decades, several important steps have been made in the dialogue of charity and in the dialogue of truth (the theological dialogue). The Roman Catholic Church has followed the principle enunciated in *Unitatis Redintegratio*, no. 4: 'maintaining unity in what is necessary, that all in the Church, according to the charge entrusted to them, keep the freedom that is due, whether its various forms of liturgical rites, and the theological development of revealed truth, spiritual life and discipline; and that in all they practice charity. This way, they will show always more fully the true catholicity and apostolicity of the Church.' We can highlight the Christological agreements signed by Blessed Paul VI and Pope Saint John Paul II, the Pope Shenouda and other Eastern Orthodox Patriarchs. We can highlight the agreements reached in ARCIC I and ARCIC II on the Eucharist, Ministry in the Church, the role of the Virgin Mary. With the Orthodox Church, we can highlight a very fruitful and profound dialogue, with documents on the Church (Munich, 1980), the sacraments of initiation and the faith (Bari, 1987), the Ministry and the priesthood (Valamo 1988), Uniatism (Balamand 1993).

All these texts are not private, written theological elaborations of meetings of theologians, but they express what the Roman Catholic Church and other churches hold in common. As I said above: the goal is unity in Christ. Do we not hold that unity is necessary? This a central issue. Unity in what is required is not only the consent given to a text, but a way of life as a church, as believers in communion with each other.

In recent decades, we have further realized that the agreement is not only a theological question, but even more a spiritual one. Wanting unity is not only a question of theological formulations adequate or not. It is also taking into account that the unity must be estimated at its true value. As Cardinal Ratzinger said in his theological work, it isn't unity that has to be justified, but the refusal of the unity. What are the reasons for which we still refuse to live in unity with another Church? Why have we refused this life in unity?

To put it bluntly, over the past years, the evolution of our churches has become increasingly problematic. Gradually, the aspiration to unity has ceased to be one of our foremost concerns. It is no longer at the top of the list on our agendas. In the relationship between our churches, the reference is no longer the mystery of the love of God for the Church, the bride of Christ, and the communion of the Trinity manifested in the people of God, but sometimes one has the impression that diplomacy, games of power, the forces of lobbying, political and religious alliances were the forces at work behind the relationship between the Christian churches. In a word, whilst keeping the same verbal rhetoric, the initial goal has become blurred, if not even obscured.

And it is in this context, that the question of the place of monastic life in this dynamic must be posed.

B. What can we do now as monks?

Some speak of the failure of ecumenism, which is not only unfair, but is also, in my view, wrong. On the Catholic side, we could quote in its entirety chapter II of *Ut Unum Sint*, entitled "the fruits of dialogue." We can measure how profound many of the changes are, and how far many of the measures taken have gone. Theological dialogue develops over time, with requirement. Relations have become necessary and natural. Certain walls have been demolished. But, to be honest, we can also note that status quo situations raise many concerns, with a hardening of position reappearing.

What can we do as monks? I just want to clarify a few indications which could be developed at a later date. I remember a member of the International Commission for dialogue between Roman Catholics and Orthodox, who said about some members: they are not monks. they don't know what it is to live community life, so a dialogue in truth is for them more difficult.

1. Fraternity

We are used to living in community, to making room in our hearts for the brothers with whom we have difficulties, and with whom we are not agreed on all points. The Benedictine monastery is a place where we are invited to receive everyone, whoever they may be, as Christ himself. This means that we have to reserve a place for everyone in a theological and spiritual dimension. I make room for my brother; I make room for the guest, the pilgrim, the poor, the person who wants to confess... The other doesn't bother us by his otherness. We see the Christ in him.

In this sense, a monastery is the perfect place to share life with a Christian brother. He will be welcomed as he is, and through hospitality, this experience of sharing, of giving and receiving, in

both directions, we will enter the world of the other. He will reveal to us, perhaps, the most valuable aspects of his personality: his vocation, his way of living in relationship with God...

The monastic life might be a place to build relationships between sister communities. There will not really be sister Churches if there are no sister communities.

2. Christian Unity, seen not as diplomatic bargaining, but as access to the Design of God.

As monks, thanks to liturgical and personal prayer, in lectio divina, in theological studies, in community life, we have the habit of considering all things in relationship with God's Plan, in the ' Oikonomia '. We never consider the difficulties, failures, successes, flourishing developments, such as isolated realities, which are purely fortuitous, but as elements that fit into God's plan. We are not supposed to hold absolutely to the triumph of our ideas, or to the perfect realization of our project, but rather we are committed to the implementation of the plan of God. This requires, from us, a detachment of all our biased reasoning, of our narrow-mindedness and finally an attachment, unequivocally to the will of God.

3. a monastery is a charismatic reality rather than an institutional one.

This is a development of the previous point. A monastery is a reality that is inserted into the plan of God, in as much as it is an event as an institution, just as the Church is both an institution and also an event. I remember a personal encounter I had with the father Boris Bobrinskoy, who was my teacher at the St. Sergius Institute in Paris. He attached great importance to this point: the Church is not only an institution but it is also an event. The religious life, the monastic life, is the place where we can experience the Church as an event.

In our monastic life, we should be able to enjoy this freedom to truly meet our brothers and sisters of other Christian churches and to share their spiritual experience, walk on the same spiritual path without being handicapped by the institutional care of our Church. With these words, I do not mean that we must free ourselves of obedience to the Church, but I want to emphasize the fact that in our monastic life we are ready to adopt a certain vision that our love for the Church in his mystery allows us to suggest, some experiences which have their source in our contemplation and our liturgical life. Monastic life should never be reduced to a system, but on the contrary should be beneficial to the whole Church.

4. the monastery is a place of conversion

In a certain sense we are never accomplished monks, but we become monks day after day, by the grace of God. In the rule of St. Benedict the word *conversio* or *conversatio* is not an optional indication but stands at the heart of the life of each monk. We are monks insofar as we journey to God, because with his grace, we have undertaken a journey of conversion, and we know that this path will end only in the last day.

This agrees perfectly with the goal of unity that Christ left us as a recommendation as his will. We travel towards perfect Unity insofar as we accept to enter into a permanent process of conversion. By conversion, we mean conversion to God, and by first choice to the newness of the call of God compared to historical reasons or theological (I do not say dogmatic) to stay separated.

As monks, we know that our life is a continuous process of conversion to the Father. This should help us understand that our denominational churches are privileged places of conversion. As the Encyclical *Ut Unum Sint* says, " It is understandable how the seriousness of the commitment to ecumenism presents a deep challenge to the Catholic faithful. The Spirit calls them to make a serious examination of conscience. The Catholic Church must enter into what might be called a "dialogue of conversion", which constitutes the spiritual foundation of ecumenical dialogue. In this dialogue, which takes place before God, each individual must recognize his own faults, confess his

sins and place himself in the hands of the One who is our Intercessor before the Father, Jesus Christ. "(US 82).

5. the primacy of prayer and the divine office

In our Benedictine tradition, St. Benedict is very clear "Nihil operi Dei praeponatur" (prefer nothing to the work of God). In the divine office we celebrate the glory of God and his efficacious presence among us. As expressed in Unitatis Redintegratio: "all know also with what love oriental Christians celebrate the sacred liturgy, especially the Eucharist, source of life for the Church and pledge of heavenly glory. There, the faithful, United with their Bishop, have access to God the father through his son, verb incarnate, dead and glorified, the outpouring of the Holy Spirit. They enter in this way in communion with the Holy Trinity and become "participants of the divine nature" (2 P 1, 4). And so, by the celebration of the Eucharist of the Lord in these churches, the Church of God is built up and grows, the communion between them being manifest with the concelebration"(UR, 15).

The celebration of the mystery of God during the night or day offices brings back us into the heart of the Church in prayer, the body of Christ, the bride of Christ. Celebrating the same praise of God, by participating in the same sacraments we manifest our unity in the body of Christ. So from his heart, from its centre we build this unity. We cannot make the choice of behaviours that oppose what we celebrated with the celebration of a common praise of the Holy Trinity.

The divine office is not one ordinary action among others but as the rule of saint Benedict says, it is the unifying centre of our life. It is from the divine office that the stability springs of our permanence in God, by means of a personal and continual prayer. As already said in Unitatis Redintegratio 8," This change of heart and holiness of life, along with public and private prayer for the unity of Christians, should be regarded as the soul of the whole ecumenical movement, and merits the name, "spiritual ecumenism."

As monks, we devote much of our time to prayer and we tend more towards continual prayer. This prayer should always be in harmony with the conscience of the whole Church, as Father Yves Congar said. To celebrate God is much more than the celebration of God by a community; it's more than the celebration of God by a denominational Church. It's rather to enter into the plan of God, into the will of God, into the life of God. In this respect, our divisions appear really petty.

6. the monastery as a place for dialogue

It has already been mentioned that the monastery is a place of fraternity. But the fraternity, a gift of God, must be built through dialogue. If we really are in dialogue with our brothers and sisters in our own communities, that should make us capable of becoming in a double fashion places and spaces for dialogue: dialogue of love and dialogue of truth, dialogue of life and dialogue of faith.

In our monasteries, when we talk about dialogue, we do not hear dialogue of ideas but dialogue of life. It's exactly what the document Ut Unum Sint means when it says, "Dialogue cannot take place merely on a horizontal level, being restricted to meetings, exchanges of points of view or even the sharing of gifts proper to each Community. It has also a primarily vertical thrust, directed towards the One who, as the Redeemer of the world and the Lord of history, is himself our Reconciliation. This vertical aspect of dialogue lies in our acknowledgment, jointly and to each other, that we are men and women who have sinned. It is precisely this acknowledgment which creates in brothers and sisters living in Communities not in full communion with one another that interior space where Christ, the source of the Church's unity, can effectively act, with all the power of his Spirit, the Paraclete." (UUS 35)

Since monastic life is a life of dialogue and conversion, it befits it to be a place of dialogue and conversion among the churches, the two, both the individual and the community, closely related.

In this perspective of dialogue, we can develop what Pope Francis has already pointed out: the mystique of encounter. In meeting the other, I open my heart to God. And this is all the more true, when I meet a brother or sister in Christ.

7. the monastery as a place of memory and living tradition.

In inter-ecclesial relations, the monasteries can be much appreciated because they are not only places of today, places of the immediate, but they are places of a long tradition, and tradition is deeply rooted in the DNA of the monastic life.

When I say tradition, I mean a living tradition in the sense of a continuous transmission of the life of Christ, through the Church, its rites, its teaching and its life. As the document *Orientalium Lumen* expresses well (Pope John Paul II, Apostolic Letter presenting the riches of the Christian East to the Latin Church: 1995) "Tradition is never pure nostalgia for things or forms past, nor regret for lost privileges, but the living memory of the Bride, kept eternally youthful by the Love that dwells within her.

If Tradition puts us in continuity with the past, eschatological expectation opens us to God's future. Each Church must struggle against the temptation to make an absolute of what it does, and thus to celebrate itself or abandon itself to sorrow." (OL,8)

Monastic life is part of the highest expression of the tradition as an experience of the living Christ, embedded in a life of holiness and grace. It's always in reference to this principle that decisions are taken. In all our churches with a deeper perception of the thus understood Tradition, we will be able to assess what belongs directly to the treasure of the Church and what does not belong directly. The Holy Spirit can move in a creative mode since it is the spirit of the surprise, but the new will always be new within the continuity of the living tradition.

The monastic life is such that tradition will make us capable of advancing with wisdom always in a communion of space but also of time, synchronic communion but also diachronic communion. It will help us to avoid the vagaries of a culture that we cannot adopt "en bloc". If we go back to our roots we will find the same source, namely the Gospel.

Conclusion

These are only a few points, that could be developed and completed over the course of our seminar. The foregoing considerations reflect the Catholic perception of the search for unity of the Church.

The relationships between the churches could be very deeply indebted to the monastic life, to our fidelity to the Holy Spirit. This could be a step forward if we could think of a few concrete steps. Full communion among our churches cannot be relegated to commissions of dialogue. As monks we must take our responsibilities. As communities, we need to ask, before God, what is His concrete will in this regard.

We will now hear the testimony of our brothers in the monastic life, and I invite you to reflect on two issues, although others may be added:

1. What do we do in our communities to promote Christian Unity?
2. What could we do? How could we do it? What would be the difficulties that we may encounter and what would be the fruits that we might hope for?

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