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# *Ut Unum Sint*

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The encyclical letter *Ut Unum Sint* (that they may be one), issued by Pope John Paul on Ascension Day 1995, was prompted by the approaching 2000th anniversary of the birth of Christ, and expresses a moving desire for the reunion of Christendom by that date. It takes its title from John 17:22, where a spiritual vision of unity in God and in Christ, through the truth of the gospel, so that the world may believe, is developed in Jesus' final great prayer. The encyclical is described as 'essentially pastoral in character' (section 3), and it ends with an 'exhortation' to unity (sections 100-103), to which the rest of the letter has been naturally leading up. Though addressed primarily, of course, to Roman Catholics, the encyclical gives a great deal of space, and much thoughtful appreciation, to Christians of other allegiances (sections 48, 68 etc), and in its closing exhortation it addresses them explicitly, alongside Roman Catholics (section 103). The encyclical does not profess to be doctrinal, though it stresses the 'fundamental importance of doctrine' (sections 18-20), and its doctrinal statements are mostly quotations or echoes of earlier Roman Catholic statements, especially in the decrees of Vatican II. These doctrinal statements serve as guidelines to its pastoral policy.

Lest anyone should think that the Church of Rome's late arrival on the ecumenical scene, and its guarded attitude to the existing ecumenical movement, mean that it is simply employing a temporary tactic by taking any part, we are told that 'at the Second Vatican Council, the Catholic Church committed herself *irrevocably* to following the path of the ecumenical venture' (section 3). We should probably take this emphatic assurance at its face value, though the letter adds, rather disconcertingly, that in doing this she was following 'the signs of the times': these signs may presumably change!

## Outline

The encyclical has 103 sections, grouped in three long chapters: I 'The Catholic Church's Commitment to Ecumenism', II 'The Fruits of Dialogue' and III 'Quanta est nobis Via?' There is much basic material in the first chapter. The second chapter reviews achievements to date. The third chapter, 'Quanta est nobis Via?' (how long a road is before us?), proposes considerations for the next stage of dialogue, including five specific topics for future ecumenical study.

## Positive Features

There is much in this encyclical which an evangelical non-Roman Catholic can only applaud. It begins by emphasizing the doctrine of the cross (section 1), the importance of unity to the evangelization of the world (section 2), the persuasive power of truth (section 3), and the need for conversion of hearts and for prayer if unity is to be achieved (section 2). These last two themes are often re-emphasized. Sections 21-7 are devoted to 'the primacy of prayer' and sections 15-17 to 'renewal and conversion'. Vatican II is quoted to the effect that 'there can be no ecumenism worthy of the name without a change of heart' (section 15), and the need for conversion is applied to the pope himself (section 4).

## Chapter I

Among the themes of chapter I, in addition to ones already mentioned, are God's will for unity (section 6), disunity as an obstacle to evangelism (section 6, compare section 98), unity as an expression of heavenly love (sections 9, 21), one's duty to the demands of truth (section 18, compare section 70), the need for truthfulness and fairness in describing and treating those with whom one disagrees (section 29), the degree of communion already existing between the various Christian bodies through sanctification, truth and baptism (sections 11, 13), and the desirability of practical co-operation even while in separation (section 40, compare sections 43, 74-5). All these themes are biblical and welcome. Alongside them, however, come statements of a more ambiguous or directly controversial kind.

Thus, there is a great stress on the visible Roman church as the very Church of Christ. 'The Church of Christ subsists in the Catholic Church, which is governed by the Successor of Peter and by the Bishops in communion with him': all other Christian communions 'derive their efficacy from the very fulness of grace and truth entrusted to the Catholic Church' (section 10, compare section 86). 'The elements of this already-given Church exist, found in their fulness in the Catholic Church and, without this fulness, in the other Communities' (section 14). 'This unity bestowed by the Holy Spirit... is a unity constituted by the profession of faith, the sacraments and hierarchical communion... To desire unity means to desire the Church... Such is the meaning of Christ's prayer *Ut unum sint*' (section 9). 'The Catholic Church thus affirms that during the two thousand years of her history she has been preserved in unity, with all the means with which God wishes to endow his Church' (section 11).

## Ecclesiology

This account of the church seems to call for certain comments. First, that there is an absolute identification between the church mystical and the church visible, which in terms of biblical theology is extremely vulnerable. Secondly, that the church visible is by bald assertion identified with the Church of Rome: all other Christian bodies, so it is said, can only be churches in an inferior sense, and by derivation from the Church of Rome. Thirdly, since the fulness of truth exists only in the Church of Rome, theological discussion with other Christian bodies is essentially a matter of informing them what the Church of Rome already thinks, and persuading them to accept it. Fourthly, in defiance of the facts of history, it is asserted that the Church of Rome has been preserved in unity for two thousand years, despite its schism with Eastern Christendom since the eleventh century, and with the Reformation churches since the sixteenth century, in both of which schisms it is hard not to see that Rome was the main offender.

Faced with a view of the Church of Christ so purely institutional and unashamedly sectarian as the above (for sectarianism is not a question of numbers but of attitudes), one is bound to wonder whether the firm claim that 'Christian unity is possible' (section 34) means, possible because all things are possible to God, or possible because unity simply means making up your mind to join the Church of Rome. Certainly, one would not want to make such claims, as are made here, for the reformed churches, even if the reformed churches were in their prime and not as degenerate and corrupt as they are today: but neither should such claims be made for the Church of Rome.

## Doctrinal Authority

The other controversial theme of chapter I is doctrinal authority. The encyclical later mentions Pope John XXIII's distinction between the deposit of faith and the formulation in which it is expressed (section 81), but chapter I is concerned to assert that, nevertheless, 'the dogmatic *formulas* of the Church's Magisterium were from the very beginning suitable for communicating revealed truth, and that as they are they remain for ever suitable for communicating this truth to those who interpret them correctly' (section 38); and that Catholic theologians engaged in ecumenism must 'stand fast by the teaching of the Church' (section 36), since they are guided not just by Scripture and tradition, as others are, but by 'the help of the Church's living Magisterium' (section 39). It is of course true that the doctrinal formularies of a church are none the worse because old, and that every theologian has a duty to the defined teaching of

the church he represents, so long as he can conscientiously represent it; but there is an awkwardness in ecumenical dialogue when the participants from one side are simply committed to what the encyclical itself (section 39) calls the 'two essential points of reference', namely, Scripture and tradition, but the participants from the other side are committed to Scripture and tradition *as interpreted by the 'Church's living Magisterium'*. This difference of approach is an obstacle in the way of the mutual 'partnership' between the two sides conferring, for which the encyclical calls (section 29), and even helps to explain why, as it says (section 66), the desire for reconciliation with Rome is not universal among Christians. The perception that Rome does not just receive the truth supplied by Scripture and tradition, but receives it and manipulates it, is not a complete distortion. The arbitrary sense which Rome gives to the Petrine texts, again in this document (sections 4, 88, 90-94), is an example of the way the 'living Magisterium' operates. If this were offered as a devotional application of those texts to the role of the Bishops of Rome, it might be to some degree acceptable, but offered in the way it is, as the primary meaning of those texts, interpreted as dogma, it is completely unsound.

## Chapter II

Chapter II, reviewing achievements to date, concentrates particularly upon relations with the Eastern Orthodox Church (sections 50-61). This is understandable enough. Certainly, the lifting of the mutual anathemas was a wonderful development, though it has not led to a restoration of communion, and the talks between the two churches have since encountered great obstacles. Rome regards the Eastern Orthodox Church as a 'sister church' (section 55), and locates the kinship in the fact that 'although these Churches are separated from us, they possess true sacraments, above all – by apostolic succession – the priesthood and the Eucharist, whereby they are still joined to us in a very close relationship' (section 50). This is a more generous, though perhaps less consistent, attitude than the Orthodox Church would take to Rome. Possession of the apostolic succession is, in Orthodox eyes, chiefly significant when rejoining Orthodoxy, not while remaining in separation. Augustinian theology at this point says the same thing, and one would expect Rome to judge accordingly, especially as she disregards the apostolic succession in the cases of Anglicans and Lutherans, charging them with defect of intention. The Orthodox may not be open to this charge, but since they reject the infallibility of the pope and the Marian dogmas, the acceptance of which Rome holds to be necessary to salvation, the Orthodox ought in consistency to be classed with other heretics, one would have thought – and all the more heinous as heretics, for possessing valid sacraments.

Of course, 'heretics' is not the language of ecumenism, and one of the

achievements listed is the recognition that other baptized Christians are 'separated brethren': it is anticipated therefore that a mutual recognition of baptisms will soon take place (sections 41-2). Another achievement is 'solidarity in the service of humanity' (section 43), a third 'approaching one another through the Word of God and through divine worship' (sections 44-6), and a fourth 'appreciating the endowments present among other Christians' (sections 47-8). All this is applied to Protestant Christians as well. It is noted that joint participation in worship with them does not extend to sharing in the eucharist, 'due to disagreements in matters of faith' (section 45), or, more specifically, due to their 'lack of the Sacrament of Orders' (section 67). They lack what the Eastern Orthodox are said in section 50 to possess – the apostolic succession, and with it true orders and a true eucharist. A great deal is here made to hang upon the apostolic succession: where there is no apostolic succession there is no ministry, and where there is no ministry there is no eucharist – or rather (to use the language introduced by Vatican II) there is not the 'fulness' of these things.

## The Apostolic Succession

The grounds for this denial deserve scrutiny. We know that St Paul emphasizes in various places (especially 1 Corinthians and 2 Thessalonians) the 'delivery' or handing-on of the gospel message by the apostles to their converts, who are bidden to hold this 'tradition' fast; and in 2 Timothy 2:2 he commands that it be entrusted to faithful men, who will be able to teach others also. In this last place he is probably thinking especially of ordained presbyters. Paul's ideas were developed by Irenaeus and Tertullian, in their controversy with the Gnostics, by claiming that the tradition of doctrine handed down by the bishops of churches of apostolic foundation was more reliable than that found in other churches – which, at that early period, may well have been true. Here was a real apostolic succession – a succession of teachers. The idea that the apostolic succession has primary reference to the ministry of the eucharist has a different origin – in the statement of Ignatius that the eucharist is valid when it is celebrated by a bishop or by one whom he authorizes. However, the only apostolic succession which clearly goes back to the New Testament is the apostolic succession of teachers. Here the apostolic succession was a valuable safeguard, but not one which could remain safe over long periods of time. And where the New Testament shows that either the ministry of the word or the ministry of the sacraments has become corrupted, the primary duty of the church is to reform it – within the apostolic succession if possible, but outside it if there is no alternative. To retain the apostolic succession at the cost of the ministry of the word or sacraments remaining deformed is to display a completely false sense of priorities.

Towards the end of chapter II, the doctrinal differences between the Reformation churches and Rome are specified (sections 66-9). Church, ministry and sacraments are mentioned, and also ethical questions, but curiously no mention is made of the great Reformation topic of justification.

## Chapter III

Chapter III, which looks to the future, and contains the discussion of the Petrine texts already noted, contains also a formal list of the doctrinal topics still needing to be resolved:

> It is already possible to identify the areas in need of fuller study before a true consensus of faith can be achieved: 1) the relationship between Sacred Scripture, as the highest authority in matters of faith, and Sacred Tradition, as indispensable to the interpretation of the Word of God; 2) the Eucharist, as the Sacrament of the Body and Blood of Christ, an offering of praise to the Father, the sacrificial memorial and Real Presence of Christ and the sanctifying outpouring of the Holy Spirit; 3) Ordination, as a Sacrament, to the threefold ministry of the episcopate, presbyterate and diaconate; 4) the Magisterium of the Church, entrusted to the Pope and the Bishops in communion with him, understood as a responsibility and an authority exercised in the name of Christ for teaching and safeguarding the faith; 5) the Virgin Mary, as Mother of God and Icon of the Church, the spiritual Mother who intercedes for Christ's disciples and for all humanity. (section 79)

There is no doubt that these topics need to be discussed. What is unfortunate, however, is that they are here stated in a manner which anticipates the results of the discussion. To take item 4, for example: if it is true that 'the Magisterium of the Church, entrusted to the Pope and the Bishops in communion with him' is 'a responsibility and an authority exercised in the name of Christ for teaching and safeguarding the faith', then all else that Rome asserts necessarily follows. The real question to be discussed is whether this is so; but if Roman Catholic theologians engaged in ecumenical dialogue are obliged to 'stand by the teaching of the [Roman] Church' (section 36), and to reject all contrary opinions, deadlock or surrender is the only possible outcome.

This list of topics is an expanded version of the list given by Vatican II and quoted in sections 66-7. It is much the same list as was assigned to ARCIC I, and was said at that time to cover the controversy between

Rome and Canterbury. By the time ARCIC II was appointed, the inadequacy of the list had been recognized, and there was added to the brief of the commission justification and controversial ethical issues. The latter are hinted at here in section 68, but the formal programme for future study makes no mention of them. In neither place is there any mention of justification, to which the encyclical makes only one passing reference, in a different context (section 13). Why the encyclical is silent on these matters is hard to say. Another important task of ARCIC II was to handle criticisms of the work of ARCIC I.

The ARCIC dialogue, which is now generally considered to have collapsed, is an object lesson in the way dialogue between Rome and a Reformation church is apt to proceed. At the first stage, there are mutual concessions. The Roman theologians, many of them used to the exchanges of academic life, make concessions where the Roman position appears to them vulnerable. On isolated issues, such as justification, where a succession of Roman theologians since Küng have conceded most of the Reformers' case, without incurring condemnation for it, they concede more. The Anglican theologians, being more deeply affected by Liberalism, and committed to less, make still larger concessions. Agreement appears to be in sight. They publish various 'statements', which are praised for their open-mindedness and criticized for their departures from tradition. They then publish 'elucidations' of them, attempting to satisfy their critics in both churches. The Anglican churches, in their easy-going Liberal way, mostly accept the statements and elucidations, but the Roman church does not. The Holy Office publishes a preliminary assessment, calling for the statements and elucidations to be brought into detailed agreement with Trent and Vatican I (not Vatican II, be it noted), and this is circulated as 'guidance' to national episcopal councils. The co-chairmen and secretaries of ARCIC express astonishment. The national episcopal councils make friendly but guarded noises. Then, after a long delay, the Holy Office publishes its final assessment, slightly modified, but making the same demands in regard to Trent and Vatican I. ARCIC is bewildered. It makes a faint attempt to satisfy Rome by giving in to virtually all its demands on the Eucharist statement and elucidation, and publishes this abject document as 'Clarifications'. Rome likes it, but there is little hope of any of the Anglican churches accepting it, so it is quoted from time to time but its status remains in limbo. To give the other ARCIC statements and elucidations the same treatment appears somewhat pointless, especially as the next in order is Ministry, and it would not be possible any longer to issue anything on this and still avoid the question of the ordination of women. So the work loses momentum, and the ARCIC enterprise runs into the ground.

## Conclusion

It would be a pity to end on a negative note. There is so much in the encyclical which is gracious, generous, self-critical and godly. It even speaks of the necessity of the 'constant reform of the Church' (section 82). But, as Trent and Vatican II clearly showed, the reform of a church which claims infallibility for itself can never extend to the realm of doctrine. It can play down, for the time being, things said in the past, but it can never unsay them. The churches of the Reformation, with all their faults (and they are many), are still capable of being reformed, because they already have been reformed. It is more difficult for them to stand fast, and in this they could take some lessons from Rome! But until Rome learns a lesson from them, that arbitrary limits must not be placed on reform when Scripture demands it, the prospects for actual progress in the reunion of western Christendom seem dim.

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