



Allocutio



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Allocutio: Other Christians

Last month I said that we must be careful in not thinking of religion in terms of denomination. But that raises the question of the various groups in Christianity. Does it really matter what branch of Christianity I belong to? And for us Legionaries who go on PPC the question arises whether we should bother about getting converts or just encourage people to be good members of their own Christian community?

Let me start by saying that it is our faith that the Catholic Church gathered around the Successor of St. Peter is that Church that Christ founded. But we must be careful. The Church consists of all the baptised, of all the believers in Christ. Vatican II says that this Church subsists in the Catholic Church which is governed by the successor of Peter and by the bishops in communion with him. But the Council immediately says that many elements of truth and sanctification can be found outside her visible structure.

The spiritual reading I read (Handbook p.311-312) makes clear that in the case of the Orthodox no effort is to be made to convert. Why? Because the Orthodox share the exact same faith! They have the same sacraments and priesthood that we have. And as that reading showed we have much to learn from them. There is one only issue that separates the Churches and that is how to see the role of the Bishop of Rome. We may put it this way: we all agree (Catholic and Orthodox) that the Bishop of Rome is the chairman of the board. What separates us is whether he has a decisive vote or whether his vote is one among all the others. Looked on from that perspective we can see that that does not give grounds for wanting to convert the Orthodox. That is a matter to be sorted out at a higher level.

Besides any attempt to convert or proselytise among the Orthodox actually works against christian unity and creates very deep antagonism. I should point out too that there is an attitude among the Orthodox in countries such as Russia which says that even among the Russian atheists or non-baptised from the communist era no conversions should be sought to the Catholic Church. They believe that such people are of their flock culturally and historically. Active proselytising of those who come historically from the Orthodox world only creates more problems. However we do not refuse baptism into the Catholic Church for those who spontaneously ask for it.

When we come to the communities of the reformation we need discernment. I have been very surprised at the genuine faith, Christian charity and goodness of life of people of such communities. I met a Methodist once who firmly believed in the real presence of Jesus in the Blessed Sacrament exposed in a Catholic Oratory and he would go and pray before Our Lord there. I have heard Anglicans witness to the Resurrection of the dead in a very real concrete way. And I have been very impressed by some of the clergy of such communities. It is hard sometimes to see the difference from Catholic Clergy in their views and personal witness. And they have good preachers too! We would do ourselves a great wrong were we to adopt a negative attitude to the protestants in general. Many of them share a faith very similar to us, some of them say the rosary, others believe that Christ is really present in the Eucharist albeit in a different manner. But their love of Him can be deeper than many a Catholic.

On the other hand the Council spoke rightly of quite large differences in doctrine and interpretation even though it rejoiced at the baptism, faith and good works of such people. It is clear that the Council encouraged dialogue as a means of over-coming division. But what we would like is that they come to



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the fullness of truth and complete unity with us in faith. There is nothing wrong in working to help them come to the fullness of unity and truth. But this work can never be seen as getting one over on the enemy but rather a real outreach in friendship to those souls genuinely searching for God and his truth. At another level if we know of Protestants who actually have real faith and a love of our Lord and who clearly are not living in any form of grave sin we should not be unduly worried about them. If grace and salvation are working in their lives, then good.

I think the bigger problem is the masses of people of all christian denominations across Europe, including Ireland, who have lost nearly all faith in God, who live in the darkness of ignorance and unhealthy life-styles and who do not turn to God. They all need to be brought in touch with Jesus Christ and be helped to develop a trust in him. We need to witness to them about what the Lord has done for us. And we need to help them by both word and deed to come to know the Lord. We should not be shy of our Catholic Church nor about all the spiritual treasures we have received through it, whether it is Christ present in the Sacraments, the great body of saints who inspire us or the office of Peter that gives us a real unity.

At the same time we should avoid any form of proselytising or using our faith as a weapon in some battle, methods that only do damage and cause more harm to the true cause of God. The damage done by warring Christian factions in the past left a lot of doubt and cynicism behind that lasts to this day. What I said last month about the method of love stands. How I believe Frank Duff was right! We go only in a spirit of friendship to each person. No one out there is our enemy. All are dearly beloved sons and daughters of God, our brothers and sisters. Let all our work be done in that spirit.

Amen

Fr Paul Churchill