

A PROTESTANT VIEWPOINT

In January The Commonweal, a weekly journal edited by Catholic laymen, announced the publication of a monthly column by a prominent Protestant theologian, Robert McAfee Brown, as a contribution to the Protestant-Catholic dialoguc. This article is reprinted in part from Dr. Brown's second column which appeared on February 1, 1963. In it he considers the basis upon which hope for Christian unity can be predicated.

One of the most impressive symbols of the kind of concern that is increasingly manifesting itself across the chasm of our divisions is the coincidence of the Week of Prayer for Christian Unity and the Christian Unity Octave. During the week of January 18-25, Christians from all branches of Christendom not only talk about unity and think about unity; they do something that is far more basic, they pray for unity.

This is the period of the year when I feel most fortified against the frequent Protestant criticism of those who engage in Catholic-Protestant ecumenical activity. The criticism usually goes like this: "What's the use of all this concern about Catholic-Protestant unity? The whole venture is going to founder because of the ultimate disagreements that cannot be overcome and that will keep us separated even if we can get rid of other misunderstandings and stereotypes.

I am sure there are times when every ecumenically-minded Christian shares this sense of human frustration. I am equally sure that such times are times of spiritual fatigue rather than of piercing insight. And at such times the antidote is not a feverish search for "reasons" to pursue ecumenical concern in spite of human obstacles. The antidote is prayer. Certainly the entire ecumenical venture *does* founder unless it is the will of God that His children be one. If this is His will, then it is simply unfaith to be persuaded in advance that it cannot come to pass because we do not see how He can achieve it. If this is *not* His will, then nothing we can do will ever make it a reality, since this is God's world and not ours.

So the ecumenical concern of Catholics and Protestants is basically a matter of a very simple, but fundamental assertion: the assertion that God wills unity rather than disunity in Christ. The one who is

persuaded of this fact—be he Catholic or Protestant—can be perplexed at the divided state of Christendom, but not unto despair.

There is, of course, something very dangerous about praying for Christian unity, particularly when we join ourselves to the petition of the saintly Abbé Couturier, that Christ's church may be made one "in accordance with His wishes and through the means that He will choose." This is to be asking for unity on God's terms rather than ours.

This means that Protestants must be willing to will the death of many of the structures that are dear to them, if those structures stand in the way of true unity. It means something of the same sort of willing on the part of Catholics, and this may be what makes some Catholics reluctant to pray on the Abbé's terms, for in Catholicism gospel and structure are more closely tied together than in Protestantism. The Catholic is convinced that of course reunion means the return of the wandering sheep to Peter's sheepfold. Until recently, the Protestant has tended to feel that the shepherd is content to sit in the sheepfold waiting for the errant sheep to come to their senses and discover the way home, recognizing that home is Rome.

But the events of the past year have indicated that such an attitude, if it ever was typical, is by no means typical of all Roman Catholics today. Although we do not yet know what will emerge from the Second Vatican Council, the nature of the debates this fall makes plain that the church is willing to take seriously Hans Küng's plea, that *vis-à-vis* Protestantism the Catholic Church must listen to all that was significant in the Reformers' protests, and by its own reforms neutralize those protests wherever this can be done in consistency with Catholic doctrine.

Whether the Catholic Church as a whole will be ready for this kind of ecumenical stance is something that will become clearer as the months go by and the Council reconvenes. But in the meantime, the whole tenor of the Second Vatican Council symbolizes a significant outreach toward the "separated brethren," and indicates, to Protestants at least, a new willingness on the part of Catholicism to demonstrate that concern for unity is not just a matter of one group's moving toward the other, but of all groups moving toward Christ.