

John Donne and Reunion.

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AT the present juncture, when the whole question of the attitude of the English Church towards other Christian Churches is being so eagerly discussed, appeal is often made to the great names of the seventeenth century—Andrewes, Laud, or Cosin. One of the most famous of Jacobean Churchmen was John Donne, Dean of St. Paul's; and while he has not left us any definite pronouncement on the subject of intercommunion, his works contain passages which, in their desire for unity and their spirit of charity towards other Christians, combined with loyalty to our own Church, seem worthy of remembrance to-day.

As a boy Donne was brought up in a Roman Catholic atmosphere. His mother was descended from Elizabeth, sister of Sir Thomas More, and his uncle, Jasper Heywood, was head of the Jesuit Mission in England from 1581 to 1583. Donne was, however, early troubled by religious difficulties, and began, when he was about twenty, to study the works of Protestant and Roman Catholic controversialists. For a time he fell into doubt and scepticism, and gave himself up to a life of dissipation in London. Years of travel and adventure followed, and then his imprudent marriage with Anne, daughter of Sir George More, of Loseley Hall, without her father's consent, led to a short imprisonment and the downfall of all his prospects. During the years of trial and disappointment which followed, he studied divinity and canon law with great industry, became intellectually convinced of the truth of the doctrines of the Church of England, and defended it in controversy with the Romanists. He was long troubled, however, by the thought of his earlier follies, and when Morton, Dean of Gloucester, offered him a comfortable benefice if he would take Orders, he felt his unworthiness too strongly to accept the offer, though his poverty at the time must have made it a very tempting one. It was not till some eight years later, when almost forty-two,

that Donne at last felt himself able to enter the ministry, and after his ordination he speedily became famous for the eloquence of his preaching and the holiness of his life. Izaak Walton, who was his intimate friend, and describes himself as his convert, says of him: "Now the English Church had gained a second St. Austin [*i.e.*, Augustine], for I think none was so like him before his conversion, none so like St. Ambrose after it; and if his youth had the infirmities of the one, his age had the excellencies of the other; the learning and holiness of both. And now all his studies, which had been occasionally diffused, were all concentrated in divinity. Now he had a new calling, new thoughts, and a new employment for his wit and eloquence. Now all his earthly affections were changed into Divine love; and all the faculties of his own soul were engaged in the conversion of others, in preaching the glad tidings of remission to repenting sinners, and peace to each troubled soul."

Donne was a close friend of George Herbert, who became his poetical disciple. With Herbert's mother he had a long and affectionate intimacy, and among his other friends he numbered Henry King, Bishop of Chichester, and Sir Henry Wotton. He was a favourite with James I., who made him a royal chaplain, and in 1621 appointed him Dean of St. Paul's. He once incurred the displeasure of Charles I., but the misunderstanding was soon cleared up, and Mr. Gosse has discovered evidence which proves that he would have been made a Bishop in 1630, if his health had not finally given way just then. He preached his last sermon on the first Friday in Lent, 1631, when he was so worn with sickness that his hearers called it "Dr. Donne's own funeral sermon." Walton has left us an immortal account of his peaceful death-bed, when he "closed many periods of his faint breath by saying often, 'Thy kingdom come, Thy will be done,'" and his soul had, "I verily believe, some revelation of the Beatifical Vision." "He did, as St. Stephen, look steadfastly towards heaven, till he saw the Son of God standing at the right hand of His Father; and being satisfied with this blessed sight, as his soul ascended and his

last breath departed from him, he closed his own eyes, and then disposed his hands and body into such a posture as required no alteration by those that came to shroud him."

Donne's theological position may best be described as that of a moderate High Churchman belonging to the school of Andrewes. He was a strong Sacramentalist, and, while he denied Transubstantiation, he looked on the Holy Communion as partaking of the nature of a sacrifice. He upheld the use of ceremonies in the Church, and pleaded for a reverent and beautiful service. He defended the Church of England against both Romanists and Puritans, claiming for it the position of a Church both Catholic and Reformed, Scriptural in its doctrine, primitive in its practice, with Orders of which the validity could only be denied by those who are not content with the standard of the primitive and the medieval Church. He has a spirited passage in which he urges that the English Church has preserved the Apostolic succession as carefully as even the Roman can claim: "When our adversaries do so violently, so impetuously cry out that we have no Church, no Sacrament, no Priesthood, because none are sent, that is, none have a right calling, for *internal calling*, who are called by the Spirit of God, they can be no judges, and for *external calling* we admit them for judges, and are content to be tried by their own canons, and their own evidences, for our mission and vocation. . . . And whatsoever they can say for their Church, that from their first conversion they have had an orderly derivation of power from one to another, we can as justly and truly say of our Church, that ever since her first being of such a Church to this day, she hath conserved the same order, and ever hath had, and hath now, those Ambassadors sent with the same Commission, and by the same means, that they pretend to have in *their* Church."

But with Donne this justifiable pride in the historic continuity of the English Church did not involve any repudiation of the rights of other, non-episcopal, Reformed Churches. The passage just quoted is followed immediately by these words: "This I speak of this Church in which God hath planted us, that God hath afforded us all that might serve, even for the

stopping of the Adversaries' mouth, and to confound them in their own way : which I speak only to excite us to a thankfulness to God for His abundant grace in affording us so much, and not to disparage or draw in question any other of our *neighbour Churches*, who, perchance, cannot derive, as we can, their power and their mission by the ways required and practised in the Roman Church, nor have had from the beginning a continuance of Consecration by Bishops, and such other concurrences, as those Canons require, and as our Church hath enjoyed. They, no doubt, can justly plead for themselves, that ecclesiastical positive laws admit dispensation in cases of necessity; they may justly challenge a dispensation, but we need none; they did what was lawful in a case of necessity, but Almighty God preserved us from this necessity."

When, in 1619, Donne visited the Continent as chaplain to the embassy sent by James I. to the Elector Palatine, his relations with the Reformed Churches seem to have been of a very friendly kind. Thus he preached before the States-General of Holland at The Hague, and was presented by them with a gold medal representing the Synod of Dort, the great assembly of divines from all the Calvinistic Churches of the Continent, which had taken place in 1618. In this sermon before the States-General, Donne says: "The Church loves the name of Catholic; and it is a glorious and an harmonious name. Love thou those things wherein she is Catholic, and wherein she is harmonious, that is *Quod ubique, quod semper*, those universal and fundamental doctrines which in all Christian ages, and in all Christian Churches, have been agreed by all to be necessary to salvation; and then thou art a true Catholic. Otherwise, that is, without relation to this Catholic and universal doctrine, to call a particular Church Catholic (that she should be Catholic, that is, universal in dominion, but not in doctrine) is such a solecism as to speak of a white blackness, or a great littleness; a particular Church to be universal implies such a contradiction."

Throughout his life Donne was troubled by the thought of "our unhappy divisions." In one of the poems of his youth (the Third Satire) he had given expression to the bewilder-

ment caused in the mind of the seeker after truth by all the conflicting claims of the various Christian sects. In his maturity, when, after long study and deliberation, he had ranged himself definitely on the Anglican side, he still felt acutely the difficulties produced by the divided state of Christendom. It seemed to him that, so long as the Church of Christ is rent into so many portions, men will ever find it hard to recognize her, and he longed passionately for reunion. These longings are expressed in a remarkable passage in a little book, "Essays in Divinity," which was not published till after his death, but which represents, according to his son's statement, "the voluntary sacrifices of several hours, when he had many debates betwixt God and himself, whether he were worthy and competently learned to enter into Holy Orders." In an age which was distinguished by the bitterness of its theological controversies, when many refused to allow that there was any possibility of salvation beyond the bounds of their own communion, Donne drew this lesson from the "diversity in names" of Scripture—that the Christian Church under many names and forms is yet one body; that Rome on one hand, and Geneva on the other, are still members of it; and that one day Christ shall reunite us all again. Unlike many advocates of reunion, he was even willing that the form and profession established should be that of some Church other than his own, "though ours were principally to be wished," as he adds with pleasant *naïveté*. The passage is so noteworthy in its clear recognition of the rights of other Churches, whilst repudiating their errors, that, in spite of its length and its somewhat involved sentences, I venture to quote it almost in full:

"Since, therefore, this variety of names falls out in no place where the certainty of the person or history is thereby offuscate, I incline to think that another useful document arises from this admitting of variety; which seems to me to be this, that God in His eternal and ever-present omniscience, foreseeing that His universal Christian Catholic Church, imaged, and conceived and begotten by Him in His eternal decree, born and brought to light when He travailed and laboured in those bitter agonies

and throes of His passion, nursed ever more delicately and preciously than any natural children . . . foreseeing, I say, that this His dearly beloved spouse, and sister, and daughter the Church should in her latter age suffer many convulsions, distractions, rents, schisms, and wounds, by the severe and unrectified zeal of many, who should impose necessity upon indifferent things and oblige all the world to one precise form of exterior worship and ecclesiastic policy, averring that every degree and minute and scruple of all circumstances which may be admitted in either belief, or practice, is certainly, constantly, expressly, and obligatorily exhibited in the Scriptures, and that grace and salvation is in this unity, and nowhere else; His wisdom was mercifully pleased that those particular churches (devout parts of the Universal) which in our age (keeping still the foundation and corner-stone Christ Jesus) should piously abandon the spacious and specious super-edifications which the Church of Rome had built thereupon, should from this variety of names in the Bible itself, be provided of an argument, *that an unity and consonance in things not essential is not so necessarily requisite as is imagined.*

“Certainly, when the Gentiles were assumed into the Church, they entered into the same fundamental faith and religion with the Jews, as Musculus truly notes, and this conjunction in the root and foundation fulfilled that which was said: ‘*Fiet unum ovile, et unus pastor*’—one fold and one shepherd. For by that before, you may see that all Christ’s sheep are not always in one fold, ‘other sheep have I also, which are not of this fold.’ So, all His sheep are of one fold, that is, under one shepherd, Christ. Yet not of one fold, that is, not in one place, nor form. For that which was strayed and alone was His sheep; much more any flock which hearken together to His voice, His Word, and feed together upon His Sacraments.

“Therefore that Church from which we are by God’s mercy escaped, because upon the foundation which we yet embrace together—Redemption in Christ—they had built so many stories high, as the foundation was, though not destroyed, yet hid and obscured; and their additions were of so dangerous a

construction, and appearance, and misappliableness, that to tender consciences they seemed idolatrous, and are certainly scandalous and very slippery and declinable into idolatry, though that Church be not in circumstantial and deduced points at unity with us, nor itself; (for with what tragic rage do the Sectaries of Thomas and Scotus prosecute their differences? and how impetuously doth Molinas and his disciples, at this day, impugn the common doctrine of grace and free-will? And though these points be not immediately fundamental points of faith, yet radically they are, and as near the root as most of those things wherein we and they differ). Yet though we branch out East and West, that Church concurs with us in the root, and sucks her vegetation from one and the same ground, Christ Jesus, who, as it is in the Canticle, lies between the breasts of His Church, and gives suck on both sides.

“And of that Church which is departed from us, disunited by an opinion of a necessity that all should be united in one form, and that theirs is it, since they keep their right foot fast upon the rock Christ, I dare not pronounce that she is not our sister, but rather, as in the same song of Solomon’s, ‘We have a little sister, and she hath no breasts; if she be a wall, we will build upon her a silver palace.’

“If, therefore, she be a wall, (that is, because she is a wall, for so Lyra expounds those words) as, on her part, she shall be safer from ruin if she apply herself to receive a silver palace of order and that hierarchy which is most convenient and proportional to that ground and state wherein God hath planted her (and she may not transplant herself): so shall we best conserve the integrity of our own body of which she is a member, if we laboriously build upon her, and not tempestuously and ruinously demolish and annul her, but rather cherish and foment her vital and wholesome parts, than either cut and suffer them to rot or moulder off. . . .

“Thus much was to my understanding naturally occasioned and presented by this variety of names in the Scriptures. For if Esau, Edom, and Seir were but one man, Jethro and Revel etc. but one man, which have no consonance with one another,

and might thereby discredit and enervate any history but this, which is the fountain of truth ; so synagogue and church is the same thing, and of the Church, Roman and Reformed, and all other distinctions of place, discipline, or person, but one Church, journeying to one Hierusalem, and directed by one guide, Christ Jesus. In which, though this unity of things not fundamental be not absolutely necessary, yet it were so comely, and proportional with the foundation itself, if it were at unity in these things also, that though in my poor opinion, the form of God's worship established in the Church of England be more convenient and advantageous than of any other kingdom, both to provoke and kindle devotion, and also to fix it that it stray not into infinite expansions and subdivisions (into the former of which, churches utterly despoiled of ceremonies seem to me to have fallen ; and the Roman Church, by presenting innumerable objects, into the latter), and though in all my thanksgivings to God I ever humbly acknowledge, as one of His greatest mercies to me, that He gave me my pasture in this park, and my milk from the breast of this church, yet out of a fervent and, I hope, not inordinate affection, even to such an unity, I do zealously wish that the whole Catholic Church were reduced to such unity and agreement in the form and profession established in any one of these churches (though ours were principally to be wished), which have not by any additions destroyed the foundation and possibility of salvation in Christ Jesus ; that then the Church, discharged of disputations, and misapprehensions, and this defensive war, might contemplate Christ clearly and uniformly. For now He appears to her as in Cant. ii. 9 : ' He standeth behind a wall, looking forth of the window shewing himself through the grate.' But then when all had one appetite and one food, one nostril and one perfume, the Church had obtained that which she then asked. ' Arise, O north, and come, O south, and blow on my garden, that the spices thereof may flow out.' For then that ' savour of life unto life ' might allure and draw those to us, whom our dissensions more than their own stubbornness withhold from us."