

# Unitas Fratrum

## THE CHURCH OF THE UNITED BRETHREN

BY ALBERT MITCHELL

FOR the beginnings of the Church of the United Brethren, or *Unitas Fratrum*, to-day commonly called the Moravians, we are carried back to the days when the Czech speaking people of Bohemia were first evangelised by missionaries of the Eastern Church, Cyril and Methodius. Politically Bohemia (it must be remembered that the lands of the Bohemian Crown once stretched from the Alps to the Baltic) fell into the region of Latin Christendom : but the Czechs never took kindly to those things in which the West differed from the East, the Latin tongue in worship, clerical celibacy, and the denial of the Cup to the Laity. So in the late 14th and early 15th Century, when personal and literary intercourse was established between Bohemia and England, the teaching of Wycliffe found a ready soil in Bohemia.

Wycliffe died in 1384 : John Huss, the leading Czech Reformer, was vilely murdered at the Council of Constance, in 1415. The greatest of the Englishmen who carried on the work in Bohemia was Peter Payne, M.A., Master of St. Edmund's Hall, Oxford, in 1410, who in 1417 joined the teaching staff at the University of Prague. There were many varieties and shades among the Bohemian Reformers, from the Chalicers or Calixtenes or Utraquists, many of whom would have been content with the concession of the Cup, to the more revolutionary wing afterwards called Taborites. Peter Payne's influence was consolidating, although he did much to emphasise the doctrinal character of the movement : Huss had accentuated moral reform. But Payne died about 1455, before the final step was taken of complete separation from Rome.

The first community of Brethren did not break with the Utraquists, now largely reconciled to Rome and recognised as the National Church under Archbishop John of Rokycan ; but formed themselves under the leading of Gregory, surnamed the Patriarch, into a rural community ministered to by Utraquist priests (in Latin orders) at Kunwald in 1457. But they did not escape persecution. In 1467, faced with the difficulty of maintaining their ministry, a Synod of the Brethren determined upon the formation of the "Church of the United Brethren." They elected by ballot nine men of blameless life, placed in a vase twelve papers, three inscribed and nine blank, and cast the lot. A boy drew out nine papers and handed them to the nine Brethren. All three inscribed papers were taken (the three left in the vase being blanks) and this was accepted as the Divine leading. But the Brethren were determined to organise their Church on an Episcopal basis ; and they had no hope of either Latin or Greek consecration ; and, indeed, they had come to believe that the

unreformed Church had forfeited all spiritual authority. They determined therefore to seek episcopal authority from the Waldensees.

The Waldensees<sup>1</sup> (*i.e.*, "The people of the valleys," of Piedmont) were a simple austere Christian Community claiming direct and unbroken succession from Claudius of Turin, Bishop there in the 9th Century, or even from earlier days, and asserting apostolic ancestry. Waldensees had left their native valleys in the work of evangelisation : some entering the ranks of the Friars Predicant, and carefully abstaining from anything that would bring them into conflict with the ecclesiastical authorities had spread wide and even into England : and a considerable community had settled in the lands of the Bohemian Crown and were at this time presided over by a Bishop or Senior Elder named Stephen. To him, therefore, went the leaders of the Brethren ; and Stephen consecrated Michael Bradacius (already a priest in Latin Orders) to the episcopate. Michael then consecrated Matthias to be a bishop : and resigned his orders received from Rome and submitted to re-ordination at the hands of Matthias whom he had himself previously consecrated (the remaining two chosen by lot being also ordained). Consistently with this all the members of the Synod were rebaptised by the newly constituted Ministry, thus declaring a belief that orders and sacraments received from Rome were tainted and unreliable.

The Church of the United Brethren so founded spread rapidly. Later they came into touch with the general stream of the Reformation and allied themselves with the Lutherans. But they found themselves in constant conflict with Habsburg Emperors and their work of Counter-reformation : and, after the battle of the White Mountain in 1620, Ferdinand II ordered them to conform or leave his dominions. Thirty six thousand families crossed the frontiers into Poland or Prussia ; the Brethren's churches and books were given to the flames, and their Church stamped out in their native land. Many buried their books and held fellowship with one another in secret and at night, handing on their traditions from father to son. Some families found a home for a while at Lissa in Poland and preserved a semblance of continuity but were scattered in 1656 : and groups here and there in neighbouring countries struggled to keep alive their identity. The years from 1620 to 1727 are known as the time of the "Hidden Seed," a phrase coined by the last Bishop of the dispersed Church, the learned John Amos Comenius, who firmly believed that in God's

<sup>1</sup> The people now called Waldensians were originally known as Vallenses, or Dalesmen. The letter "d" appears to have been intruded into their name by their enemies in a malicious intention to obscure their ancient lineage and assert them to be disciples of Peter, the Poor Man of Lyons in the twelfth century, who acquired or was credited with the surname of Valds or Waldo. But there is no evidence that Peter ever visited Italy ; probably he acquired knowledge of the Vallenses (or Vaudois) tenets from one of their travelling missionaries. The Vallenses were so known at least in the ninth century and probably much earlier. There is obscurity about their episcopal orders, as when they came under the influence of Calvin and accepted the Genevan discipline they ceased to care much about that matter. But it is clear that the "Brethren" accepted, and intended to continue, the claim made for them of due succession from apostolic times. The *Unitas* is in intention, and belief, an episcopal body, and believes its episcopacy to be of apostolic derivation. A.M.

providence, his Church would revive and come together. In this belief he kept alive the episcopal succession by consecrating his son-in-law Peter Jablonsky, who in turn transmitted the precious gift to his son Daniel Ernest Jablonsky, who in 1727 was Court Preacher at Berlin.

Fifty years after the death of Bishop Comenius a young Saxon nobleman, Count Nicholas Louis of Zinzendorf, offered an asylum on his estate to a little group of persecuted Moravians led by Christian David, who like Zinzendorf himself had fallen under the influence of the Pietist theology. Two years later in 1724 they were joined by some of the Hidden Seed from Kunwald: and the community of Herrnhut came into existence and formed a rally point for persecuted Protestants. In 1727 Zinzendorf, who had composed his strange community by giving them Statutes of discipline, discovered some old works of Comenius including the Order of Discipline of the Brethren's Church. The men of the Hidden Seed received the discovery with joy: and at Holy Communion on August 13, a movement of spiritual renewal began. At first the Renewed Brethren did not regard themselves as a separate Church but rather as a community within the Lutheran Church, and when some of them ventured in growing missionary zeal to England they adopted the same attitude to the Church of England, and received sympathy from the Bishops. Zinzendorf himself received Lutheran Orders. But in 1735 Bishop Daniel Jablonsky, surviving bishop of the Ancient Church of the Brethren, while refusing to consecrate Zinzendorf, consented to consecrate David Nitschmann the leader of the group of the Hidden Seed from Kunwald to be Bishop solely for the purposes of the Mission Field: thus it was the foreign missionary impulse that precipitated the completion of the Renewal of the Church. But two years later Zinzendorf himself (after consulting the Archbishop of Canterbury, Dr. Potter) received consecration as Bishop at the hands of Jablonsky (whose altered attitude may have been due to the intervention of the King of Prussia) and Nitschmann. The Renewed Church passed to its complete reconstruction both for the foreign missionary field and for its home expansion. In 1749, by the good offices of the English Episcopate, an Act of the British Parliament recognised them as "an ancient Episcopal Church" and gave them status in the American and other colonies, and exempted them from penalties because of their refusal to take oaths in legal proceedings. In their work in England they were scrupulous to respect the National Church and taught those whom they evangelised to communicate at the parish Churches. It was not until after the Methodists had broken away from the Church of England (a step against which the Brethren protested) that local and popular influences operated to make a breach in the Brethren's ideals, and bring about the change from missionary communities within the English Church to a separate Church in 1857 when the Brethren in England and in America organised themselves independently of those in Germany, but with the full concurrence of Herrnhut, and under the one General Synod.

But the Church of the United Brethren is still principally and primarily a Missionary Community. The Continental Province is

responsible for the work in South Africa, Nyassa, and Surinam : the British Province for the work in the West Indies, Labrador, Demerara, Unyamwezi, and Western Tibet, and the Leper House in Jerusalem : and the two American provinces for the work in California, Alaska, Nicaragua, and Honduras. The numbers in the Mission Field exceed the numbers in the Home Provinces.

Zinzendorf had gained his first enthusiasm for the conversion of the heathen beyond while still a boy from Danish sources : the Renewed Church of the Brethren took up the challenge in 1731/2 and the first missionaries set out to the Danish West Indies to work among the slaves. It is sometimes asserted that they sold themselves for slaves. This is untrue ; but they shared the hardships of the negroes. David Nitschmann, afterwards Bishop, was one of the first missionaries. From the Danish West Indies they extended to the British West Indies : meantime they had adventured to Greenland where their hardships were equally great. It was in 1746 that the great change of method came. Hitherto they had laboured at moral and social amelioration, thinking their hearers too wild for the simple Gospel. Now they began to teach the Story of the Cross, and the message broke the savage hearts. Henceforth they determined to "preach nothing but the love of the Slaughtered Lamb." The next field essayed was that of the North American Indians (1735) : here also suffering, torture, death by fire, and massacre, failed to daunt the simple hearted Brethren. South America was attacked soon after : the Arawack Mission was abandoned in 1808 : but in Surinam they were more successful. In 1737 the Brethren passed to evangelise the Hottentots of South Africa : in 1764, after preliminary tests, they began to preach in Labrador : here they taught for nearly thirty years before they saw Revival. Their early Missions to the Jews were ruined by dissension. Fleeting attempts to touch Lapland, the Samoyedes, and the Kalmucks in the North : and Guinea, Ceylon, Algiers, and Turkey in the South, and even Egypt and Abyssinia, were made : and the Brethren reached India as well as Persia : but their early efforts here were not very successful. Mortality was very high in all their Missions in the early days. But they effected more in Central America ; and among the aborigines in Southern Australia. In 1855 they entered Tibet : here they have done a great linguistic and medical work. The Leper Home in Jerusalem was opened on Ascension Day 1867 : the Demerara Mission was commenced about 1878 : Alaska was entered in 1884 : the California Mission started in 1890 : and the same year saw the North Greenland Mission. In 1888 the Brethren accepted a suggestion from Alexander Mackay, of Uganda, that they should enter the German lands in East Africa, and the Nyassa Mission commenced. But the actual labours of the Brethren in the Regions Beyond do not exhaust their services to the work of Evangelisation of the World. Their simple piety, stern standards of devotion to duty, and thorough methods in education, have had great influence upon all Protestant Missionary systems. Pre-1914 statistics give the numbers of the Brethren as follows : Continental Province 9,620, British Province 4,490 ; America, Northern Province 26,387, Southern Province (North Carolina) 11,451 ; Czecho-

Slovakia 6,741 ; Mission Fields 138,318.

The Brethren's worship is liturgical : their form of administration of the Lord's Supper is exceedingly simple. Their episcopate is not diocesan in the English sense : but somewhat reminds us of that of the ancient Keltic Church of Iona. All bishops sit in the Synods : and Bishops alone ordain.

The Committee of Divines appointed by the Archbishop of Canterbury in 1906 to look into the matter reported that the episcopal succession of the *Unitas Fratrum* was not proven : to this report the Bishops of the *Unitas* demur. The main weakness is in regard to the Waldensian tradition. But in 1908 the Lambeth Conference recommended the participation of Anglican Bishops in consecration of Bishops of the *Unitas* upon specified conditions and with consequent results : but unhappily there has been a lull in or suspension of the negotiations for closer relations, which is not altogether understandable. No doctrinal difficulties hinder relations between the Church of England and the *Unitas Fratrum*. The Lambeth Conference Committee of 1897 regarded it as " a matter of expediency as well as of duty to bridge over or remove the obstacles which at present separate the two Communions," and in 1908 the claim of the *Unitas* was stated to be " in many ways unique."

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