

Anglican-Roman Prospects

COLIN BROWN*

TRADITIONALLY evangelicals have regarded Roman Catholicism with an attitude of suspicion, if not downright hostility. As an undergraduate, when I first started buying theological books, high on the list of recommended reading were such works as Blakeney's *Manual of Romish Controversy* and T. C. Hammond's *One Hundred Texts*. The former was described in its preface as 'a complete refutation of Popery in a short space'. Both works contained a comprehensive catalogue of Roman errors together with chapter and verse refutation from scripture. And both were regarded as part of the young evangelical's essential equipment in preparation for the time when, sooner or later, he would come into contact with the Church of Rome.

This attitude has its roots in history going back to the Reformation, and is part of the Protestant, if not the national, heritage. After all, was it not Rome that had all but quenched the gospel in the Middle Ages and was its bitterest opponent at the Reformation? Lurking at the backs of many minds was the feeling that Roman Catholics could not be proper, loyal Englishmen. For do they not owe an allegiance to the Pope in Rome which transcends all national ties? And had not that allegiance found most tangible expression in the burnings of Protestants under Mary, the excommunication of Elizabeth, the papal incitements to treason and the various plots that followed? In the nineteenth century Englishmen saw a revival of papal aggression in the re-establishment of the Catholic hierarchy in 1850 and the definition of papal infallibility at the first Vatican Council in 1870.

Now alongside of the uncompromisingly hostile view there has been a somewhat more sympathetic one, as represented (for example) by the American scholar, J. Gresham Machen. The latter took a positively more favourable view of Rome than he did of liberalism. For, though corrupted, Rome was still recognisably Christian. Catho-

* A paper given at the Islington Conference, June 6th 1972.

lics still believed in the Trinity, the divinity of Christ, and the reality of grace, whereas it is far from clear that this is so in certain forms of liberalism. Nevertheless, Protestant apologetics has traditionally had a special branch devoted to Roman Catholicism. Karl Barth saw the root of Roman error in what he called the theology of the *and*. Because by speaking of faith *and* works, grace *and* nature, scripture *and* tradition, Rome effectively undermined her positive teaching by adding some man-made construction. The root error in all this was a refusal to let God be God.

Traditional Protestant apologetics has taken the form of producing catalogues of obnoxious teaching carefully annotated with references to official pronouncements and scripture refutations, on such matters as: papal authority scripture and tradition, the magisterium sacramental grace, the priesthood, transubstantiation, the mass, the Blessed Virgin Mary, the saints, penance, indulgences, purgatory and certainty in faith. The compilation of such inventories has been facilitated by Catholic textbooks and such works as Denzinger's *Enchiridion* which assemble official pronouncements and documents for easy reading. Now, on this I would like to say three things:

1. In my experience of English catholicism such catalogues do not represent a distillation of Catholic belief. Roman Catholics do not see their faith in quite the same way. They may admit that this or that item is held by some. They do not deny the existence of some corresponding official pronouncement. They may admit that Catholicism in Ireland, Spain or South America may be quite different. But often the official pronouncements of the remoter past do not seem to touch the nerve of their beliefs.

I am not saying that such beliefs are not present, or that Catholics see things in the same ways that Protestants see them. But I am saying that Catholics do not always see themselves as their opponents see them, and that dogmas like those of the immaculate conception and papal infallibility often do not seem to play the regulative part in Catholic thinking that we might expect.

2. This leads me to my second observation, that nevertheless such dogmas and pronouncements do constitute a problem. They are a problem for the Anglican who just cannot overlook them and pretend that they are not there, when it comes to questions of church unity and joint-co-operation at a local level. But equally—if not more so—they are a problem for the Catholic himself. This or that dogma may not impinge much on the life of the individual. But sooner or later the question of the authority and irreformability of Catholic dogma will have to be faced. If not, it will be the rock which will finally sink Catholic-Protestant unity discussions and ultimately tear apart the Catholic church in the modern world. It is not enough to say that some dogma needs reformulation in modern language or that some new definition has to be made to complement and balance some older

formulation. What needs to be admitted is that the church is not infallible, and erroneous and unsupported dogmas of the past (whether Catholic or Protestant) need to be withdrawn.

3. My third observation is that evangelical Anglicans can no longer sit on the fence and throw stones. Stone-throwing is hardly a Christian occupation, in any case. But the sheer pressure of events forces us to think again our attitude to Rome. In 1966 the Archbishop of Canterbury visited Pope Paul. Their Common Declaration announced their intention to

‘inaugurate between the Roman Catholic Church and the Anglican Communion a serious dialogue which, founded on the Gospel and on the ancient common traditions, may lead to that unity in truth, for which Christ prayed’ (*The Archbishop of Canterbury’s Visit to Rome March 1966*, p. 14, translation amended).

Since then the Anglican-Roman Catholic International Commission has been set up, and in September 1971 they produced an *Agreed Statement on Eucharistic Doctrine*. In the remainder of my paper I wish to do three things:

- i. Comment on the *Agreed Statement on Eucharistic Doctrine*.
- ii. Make some observations on trends in the Roman Catholic Church, as I see them.
- iii. Make some observations on the question of unity at a local level. In each case my comments will be largely personal. And in the nature of the case they make no pretence at being a balanced survey of the whole field.

1. *The Agreed Statement on Eucharistic Doctrine*

i. First of all, one cannot help being struck by the attempt to get away from the language of scholasticism and Counter-Reformation theology. There is a directness about the language which tries to speak clearly and in a way which avoids the controversies of the past.

ii. There is an attempt to recover and retain the perspectives and emphases of the Bible. Roger Beckwith has drawn attention to the balance between the Word of God and the two sacraments (§ 2), the assertion of the historical completeness of the atonement on the cross (§ 5), the recognition that Christ is in different ways present in the whole service (§ 7), the stress on the necessity of faith if the sacrament is to result in a life-giving personal relationship between Christ and the communicant (§ 8), the assertion of the importance of the actual reception of the sacrament (§ 9), the emphasis on the work of the Holy Spirit (§§ 9, 10), and the recognition that the sacrament is a foretaste of the world to come (§ 11) (cf. his article on the statement in the *English Churchman*, January 7th 1972).

But despite all this, as Roger Beckwith goes on to argue, the state-

ment is essentially Catholic and correspondingly un-Anglican at the two focal points of 'The Eucharist and the Sacrifice of Christ' (§ 5) and 'The Presence of Christ' (§§ 6-11).

iii. The Catholic doctrine of eucharistic sacrifice is reaffirmed in the statement:

'The eucharistic memorial is no mere calling to mind of a past event or of its significance, but the church's effectual proclamation of God's mighty acts. Christ instituted the eucharist as a memorial (*anamnesis*) of the totality of God's reconciling action in him. In the eucharistic prayer the church continues to make a perpetual memorial of Christ's death, and his members, united with God and one another, give thanks for all his mercies, entreat the benefits of his passion on behalf of the whole church, participate in these benefits and enter into the movement of his self-offering.'

iv. The Commission met the problem of transubstantiation by offering a definition of how the term is used in a footnote. This said that:

'The word *transubstantiation* is commonly used in the Roman Catholic Church to indicate that God acting in the eucharist effects a change in the inner reality of the elements. The term should be seen as affirming the *fact* of Christ's presence and of the mysterious and radical change which takes place. In contemporary Roman Catholic theology it is not understood as explaining *how* the change takes place.'

By speaking of *how* the term is used, the Commission neatly avoided proposing a new definition or endorsing an old one. The question was solved by ducking it. But the questions have to be asked: Can the Roman Catholic Church get round its great affirmations on the subject in this way? And can the Church of England agree to the statements that:

'Communion with Christ in the eucharist presupposes his true presence, effectually signified by the bread and wine which, in this mystery, become his body and blood' (§ 6).

'According to the tradition order of the liturgy the consecratory prayer (*anaphora*) leads to the communion of the faithful. Though this prayer of thanksgiving, a word of faith addressed to the Father, the bread and wine become the body and blood of Christ by the action of the Holy Spirit, so that in communion we eat the flesh of Christ and drink his blood (§ 10).

This action is described as 'the real presence of his body and blood', and its purpose is 'to transmit the life of the crucified and risen Christ to his body, the church, so that its members may be more fully united with Christ and with one another'. If the answer to the first of my two questions would seem to be affirmative, the answer to the second would appear to be negative.

v. I would like to make two further points on the presence of Christ. The first is that the emphasis of the Statement falls on the presence of Christ in the elements which is then communicated to the

faithful church. It seems to me that the Bible and the historic Anglican position locates the presence of Christ not in the elements as such but in *the whole action* of thanksgiving, hearing the Word of God in faith, and eating and drinking and thereby proclaiming the Lord's death till he comes. In so doing, we proclaim a real absence of Christ as well as a real presence.

My other comment on the presence of Christ is connected with the fact that in the New Testament Christ's presence is not limited to the Lord's Supper. He is present in the proclamation of his word, in prayer, in care and service—albeit incognito—and in encounter with other people (Matt. 10: 40ff.; 11: 28f.; 18: 20; 25: 31-40; Luke 10: 16; John 13: 20).

We may—and we must—assert Christ's presence in the whole action of the Eucharist. But we must also assert it in every sphere of life. To assert it in one place and not another is to distort. Now this leads me to my final point about the statement, which is perhaps the most important.

vi. This is that we have been given a statement about the eucharist entirely out of context. Now, in everyday life we all know how words taken out of context can give the most misleading impression. The same is equally true of theological statements.

The statement may well conceal behind its positive affirmations what is perhaps a more fundamental disagreement—the nature of the means of grace. The statement positively and apparently also comprehensively ties grace to the sacrament. Are we to understand grace in terms of the sacraments or the sacraments in terms of a wider understanding of grace? This was one of the great issues of the Reformation which the Agreed Statement hardly clarifies.

Sacramental doctrine has been compared with the roof of a building. Its shape—unless it is a false one—depends on the shape of the building underneath. The difficulty here is that we have got a roof without a building. We are not even told what the Statement is for. It could be that someone somewhere is hoping for a quick breakthrough on the cultic level in the hope that other difficulties (like that of the validity of ministries on which the Anglican-Methodist scheme has come to grief) will take care of themselves.

2. *Trends in the Roman Catholic Church*

i. The subject is so vast that one hardly knows where to start or what to say in a few minutes. But perhaps the first thing that must be said is that the Church of Rome is not a monolithic entity in which everyone believes the same things and toes the same official line. Traditional apologetics—both Catholic and Protestant—have often made out as if it was. But Rome is far from being a monolithic

institution today, and I doubt if it ever was. One has only to look at the history of Trent, Vatican I, not to mention Vatican II, to see the currents and cross currents that have always been at work.

ii. The big question today is: Which way is Rome going? Looking at Rome from the outside, I cannot help feeling that Rome—no less than the Protestant denominations—has lost its sense of direction. Vatican II did not start the process of reform, and it has certainly not stopped it. It tried to give guidelines, and it obviously did enact reforms like having the mass in the vernacular languages. But as with the Church of England today, institutions can so easily get bogged down with administrative reforms and restructuring that they lose their sense of direction and mission.

But the questions which preoccupy Rome are not only those of structures and reform. They concern authority and the whole nature of the faith. In the last decade there have been optimistic Protestants who felt that Rome was becoming more biblically orientated. There is a sense in which this is true. There is certainly a renewed interest in the Bible. At the same time the Catholic Church is trying to absorb in a decade or so the impact of critical study which has shaken Protestantism for more than a century. Not long ago I was present at a discussion in which a Catholic theologian questioned the historical authenticity of Matthew 16 on which for so long the case for papal authority has been made to stand.

iii. The most basic of all questions which divide Catholics and Protestants is that of authority. Traditional Catholic apologetics used to claim that Protestantism gave too much scope for private judgment. It was not enough to have the Bible. The Bible needed the church as an interpreter. Curiously enough, the wheel now seems to have turned the full circle. In my experience of talking with Catholic theologians, the first thing one is told in discussing an official pronouncement is that one must see it in its context and against the background of its origin. One has to find out the influences which led to this choice of words rather than that. It seems to me that one is back with private judgment with a vengeance. For one is left to the mercies of the historian and commentator to determine the meaning of the text. And each man does what seems right in his own eyes. The interpretation of the documents of Vatican II is a case in point. Another is the status and authority of the encyclical on birth control, *Humanae Vitae* (1968).

Since the definition of papal infallibility in 1870, no one seems to know what pronouncements are actually infallible. But this is only part of the much larger problem of the teaching office of the church. Vatican II made some headway on this. But the *Constitution on Divine Revelation* only shows how wide and deep the gulf is when it declares:

'Sacred tradition and sacred Scripture form one sacred deposit of the word of God, which is committed to the Church. Holding fast to this

deposit, the entire holy people united with their shepherds remain always steadfast in the teaching of the apostles. . . . The task of authentically interpreting the word of God, whether written or handed on, has been entrusted exclusively to the living teaching office of the Church, whose authority is exercised in the name of Jesus Christ' (§ 10).

iv. The twentieth century has been called the ecumenical century. For two-thirds of its life unity schemes have increasingly dominated the Protestant denominations. And as time has gone on, one cannot help thinking that a good deal of life has been drained away from them in the process. In the twenties and thirties the visionaries looked to the time when the unity schemes would enable the church to stride forward to even greater conquests. But as the dream draws closer to reality, the steam seems to have gone, and the Protestant churches of England seem weaker now and with less vision than almost at any time since they were founded.

Now, after years of aloofness, Rome seems to be emerging as the front-runner in ecumenical discussion. It seems curious that after the condemnation of Anglican orders in 1896 and the abortive Malines Conversations in the 1920s, Vatican II can speak of 'the separated brethren'. The sincerity of the expression and the warmth of personal response on the part of Catholics cannot be called in question. But even here one can detect a certain ambiguity. Although no Catholic pronouncement since the Reformation has spoken more generously than the *Decree on Ecumenism*, it maintains the basic Catholic approach of desiring the separated brethren to return to the fold.

v. There can be few, if any, Catholic theologians who regard Vatican II as irreformable. It is therefore right to ask whether the last word has yet been said about unity. The most basic question of all here is to ask what kind of unity we are seeking. It may be that recent experience is telling us that we ought not to think in terms of merging denominations at all, and that the kingdom of God is not arranged by the organisation men working at the top. I personally hope so. It seems to me that the kind of unity that we ought to be seeking is the unity of working together—as and when possible—at grass roots level. It seems to me that the unity we should seek should be less structured in terms of unifying denominations and more federal in allowing the local churches to operate more freely within the general structure. Here we can only put the point in the form of a question for any future agenda. What kind—or kinds of unity—should we seek? It seems to me that the most fruitful kind—as with all great movements in the church—have been on the local level and on the level of individuals and groups with vision and calling to do something in the name of God.

3. *Unity at the Local Level*

LET me then turn finally to the question of prospects for unity at the local level. Some time ago the Church Society published a Memorandum by Dr. Packer on *Relations between English Churchmen and Roman Catholics*. I find myself in full agreement with his four concluding guiding principles.

i. *We should not decline all forms of contact with Roman Catholics.* No doubt there will be some occasions when in conscience bound captive to the Word of God we shall feel obliged to stand apart. Many would feel bound to refuse an invitation to attend Mass. On the other hand, willingness to discuss in dialogue or to take part in some general scheme—such as one of care for the elderly and sick—need not imply compromise of witness. Indeed, to refuse to take part in such a scheme could be to adopt a Pharisaical stance and proclaim one's own self-righteousness as a concern which has prior claim over humanity.

ii. *We need to be masters of our own position before we talk with Catholics.* This is not to say that we must intend to dominate all forms of dialogue. Rather it is to say that, if discussion is to be fruitful, both for ourselves, our partners and our people, we need to be informed.

iii. *We need to be clear regarding principles of Christian unity before we join in united action with Roman Catholics.* Perhaps the greatest need of the churches at the present time is for men of vision and principle. Honesty, wisdom and love require us to shun short cuts and cheap expedients.

iv. *Where Anglican-Roman meetings take place, we should press for joint Bible study.* Here there is no need to adopt the stance of a leader of the blind with the corresponding danger of turning out to be blind oneself. In the Bible at least we profess to have common ground. The idea of the church *semper reformanda* has always been a Protestant watchword. The Catholic Church is today more aware than it has ever been in its history of the need for reform. The brightest hope for the future lies in our joint willingness to sit together under the Word of God and seek his light on our earthly pilgrimage.