

CHRISTIAN DENOMINATIONS

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On Thursday next the Second Vatican Council will assemble in St. Peter's Cathedral at Rome. This is an event of interest to all Christian people; for Christians are members one of another and should take a prayerful interest in each other's affairs, especially in their Christian affairs. So I appreciated receiving through the post, from one of my listeners, a pamphlet published by the Roman Catholic Church on the coming Vatican Council, and I read it with much interest. The writers who are the Roman Catholic bishops of N.S.W. ask the readers to exercise humble and fervent prayer to God for the Council, and I am sure all true Christians will respond.

There have been many Christian Councils in the past as well as in the present time, though from the time that the Christian community has been divided up into different denominations, different sections do not always recognise the Councils of others. The Greek Orthodox recognises the first seven general councils; the Protestants for the most part recognise the first four, together with their own councils held in the time of the Reformation and right through to the present day; Roman Catholics recognize twenty general councils and the coming council will be their twenty-first. It will be composed of the Roman Catholic bishops of the world. In this connection it is worth recalling that bishops as we now know them are a development since New Testament times. In the New Testament the word 'bishop' was another name for priest or presbyter, that is to say, for the local ministers; a reference to Acts 20 or Titus 1:5,7 makes this clear. As you know, the English word 'priest' is a shortened form of presbyter which means elder, and which was used in the New Testament for the local ministers of the congregations. Bishop and presbyter or priest, were identical terms in the New Testament, and in the Church's early years. This is stated emphatically by Jerome, the translator of the Latin Vulgate, and one of the most learned doctors and fathers of the ancient Church. In his 69th letter he wrote "Among the ancients, bishops and presbyters are the same, for the one is a term of dignity, the other of age". Again in letter 146 he wrote "presbyters are the same as bishops". In letter 58 he stated that "presbyters hold the rank which apostles once held". And he identified them with bishops. Not only St. Jerome, but all the leading Christian writers of his time such as St. Chrysostom, are equally explicit that in the early Church bishop was the name of the ministers of the local congregation. This reminds us that in the New Testament and early times the local congregation was the essential unit. It was not till later that a denominational structure arose, superior to the local congregation, unifying and in some cases controlling that congregation.

In our own times there are several different sorts of denominational systems uniting local churches, though in the earliest times there was none; each local church was simply united by brotherly affection with its neighbouring church. But now there are several different structures, some monolithic and hierarchical, others more democratic, but it would be a mistake to think that one sort rather than another is essential. Indeed, if we may judge from the earliest days of the church, none is essential. Denominations may well be a valuable development, so long as they serve the local church and do not submerge it.

There are, however, some temptations to be avoided. Firstly, we must not seek to advance the work of God by the outward splendour of our denomination, because our spiritual struggle is not against flesh and blood but against spiritual wickedness and spiritual enemies. We humans are impressed by outward splendour of building and titles and rank, but our opponents in the Christian fight are not our fellow men, but Satan and his spiritual hosts. These foes are not impressed by what may impress us. What defeats them is not outward splendour but Christian faith, Christian virtues, and prayer, in the Church in its members and its officers. St. Paul said

explicitly that it is God's purpose to use the weak things of the world to overthrow the strong, and to use those who are little accounted of by the world, to advance His cause, in order that God's power might be the more obviously displayed. In this respect outward splendour may in itself be a hindrance to our usefulness as God's instruments.

The second temptation to be guarded against is thinking that a strong denominational structure assists the church in its fight against evil in the world. History does not support this conclusion and, indeed, it is based on forgetfulness that our real strength is in God's unchanging character, and in His promise that He will support and give the victory to those who are faithful to Him, even though the tide of events seem outwardly to be going against them. We are not to look to some outward organisation whether to the visible church or to any other body as though it were the panacea for the world's ills. Indeed to do so is to forget that God controls the hearts of men directly, through His all sovereign power; and that it is to God that we are to look when we see the world heading for disaster, believing that He is well able to direct the world into paths of safety so long as we are faithful to walk in His ways. For He has direct control over the hearts and wills of men whom He has made.

Our trust then must not be placed in a political or religious panacea but only in God, that He will continue His government of human affairs in the future as He has in the past. Thus the search for a panacea against impending troubles, though a strong temptation, is really illegitimate for Christians, as it indicates a lack of faith in God's active present government of His world. It is into this mistake that Pope Pius XII has fallen when in his encyclical on the mystical body of Jesus Christ he held out the Roman Catholic Church as "the only haven of refuge in our trouble tossed world". But we should look to no organisation whether political or religious as a haven of refuge, but only to God Himself and His never failing promises. He is our only haven. In the same way it is sometimes argued that the Roman Catholic Church is the only bulwark against communism, but again it must be said that the only true bulwark against communism is not an organisation but the Word of God preached and taught in the various congregations and received in the hearts of the people of any country. Failing this, no organisation, however well knit, can protect; yet if God's Word is in the hearts of the people, communism is impotent.

The third temptation is to think that there is only one denominational structure which is lawful. Episcopal denominationalism is ancient and widespread, taking different forms with the Greek Church, the Roman Catholic, the Lutheran and the Church of England, and these all differing from the early Church where the bishop was the local minister. But there are no grounds for saying that episcopacy is the only denominational structure legitimate to link local churches, let alone to say that one of the episcopal forms is the only legitimate denomination. It is a mistake to identify the Church of Christ with our form of denomination. This mistake is illustrated by the pamphlet on the ecumenical council to which I referred earlier, which regards the question of unity among Christians as being "fundamentally a question of homecoming for all our fellow Christians who are separated from the See of Peter". But unity of Christians will not be achieved through a unity of denominational structure. In John 17:20, our Lord prayed for Christians "that they may be one with us as Thou Father art in Me and I in Thee, so that the world may come to believe that it was Thou Who sent Me". The unity of Christians that Christ asked for is a unity in God, not a unity in denominational structure. He prayed "that they may be one in us, as Thou Father art in Me and I in Thee". It is by becoming united more closely to Christ that Christians become more closely united one with the other. Christian unity is essentially a unity of heart, a unity of love, springing from a unity of faith in Christ Who loved us and gave Himself for us. If there is a failure of unity at this level, that is, a failure of unity in love, in heart, in the Spirit of God, then denominational unity is emptied of meaning. It was because Christians grew cold in their love for each other, because they grew cold in their love for God, that denominations split off from each other and remained in isolation. This was historically

the order, first a failure of unity in love, then a failure of unity in organisation; and if we are to reunite our organisations, which is in itself desirable, we must first of all unite ourselves more closely together in the faith of the Scripture, and in apprehension of the love of God. This need not wait on any organisational negotiations, but is the duty of every Christian in whatever denomination he finds himself, to learn to love his brother Christian by learning to love God more purely, and this he may do by meditating on the love of God for him as it is revealed in the Bible, for as we see more clearly God's love for us, so we love Him and love our brother Christians. As St. John puts it "We love because Christ first loved us". We ought all to pray most fervently for an increase of brotherly love, Christian for Christian, both within the denomination within which we find ourselves, and across denominational barriers. This is real Christian unity, and if by God's grace through prayer and effort we progress here it will not be long before the denominational barriers are able to be successfully surmounted, and the outward will reflect the inward unity. We should all set our hearts and minds on achieving this, through prayer and the active exercise of a loving spirit towards all our fellow Christians who are born again of God's Spirit through His Word, in whatever denomination this experience comes to them.