

Talk on Spiritual Ecumenism to Community of God's Delight, Dallas, May 29, 2011

We probably associate the term “spiritual ecumenism” with prayer for Christian unity or with ecumenical discussion and sharing in the area of spirituality. In fact the term “spiritual ecumenism” was coined by the French ecumenical pioneer, the Abbé Paul Couturier of Lyon, France (1881 - 1953). Couturier was one of the most important ecumenical pioneers in the Catholic Church and I want to explain why.

In 1908 Fr Paul Wattson, a recent Catholic convert from the Episcopal Church, based in Graymoor, NY, launched what he called The Church Unity Octave, to be observed from Jan 18 to Jan 25 each year. This was explicitly prayer for the return of separated Churches and confessions to Rome, to renewed obedience to the see of Peter. This Octave was blessed by Pope Benedict XV. Not surprisingly, very few other Christians felt able to participate. The observance of the Octave spread rather slowly, almost exclusively in the English-speaking world.

In the 1920s, Fr Couturier began working with refugees from the Russian Revolution of 1917. Most of them were Orthodox Christians. He was very impressed by their depth of faith and their piety. Over the next few years Fr Couturier felt increasingly uncomfortable with the approach of some Catholics to these Orthodox refugees trying to detach them from the Orthodox Church and to get them to join the Eastern Byzantine-rite in union with Rome, often known as Greek Catholics. Then he paid a visit to a new Benedictine monastery in Belgium, founded to work for unity, especially between Catholics and Orthodox, in response to an appeal from Pope Pius XI. Here Couturier was deeply impacted, we would say by the Lord, encountering a deep respect for the Orthodox Church and its heritage. He experienced a call, at the age of 51, to dedicate his life to work and especially prayer for Christian unity. In 1933, he initiated prayer for unity in Lyon, using the format of the Octave from Fr Wattson. However, he knew in his heart that there had to be a way that all Christians could pray in harmony for Christian unity. So he sought light from the Lord on how all Christians could pray in harmony for the unity of the whole Body of Christ. He received his answer from John 17: 21: the prayer of Jesus himself for the unity of his followers: “May they all be one; as you, Father, are in me, and I in you, so also may they be in us “. So for the rest of his life Couturier promoted prayer for unity praying for the unity that Christ wills by the means that Christ wills. He soon re-named his week of prayer “The Week of Prayer for Christian Unity”. So for the next 25 years until Vatican Two two different forms of prayer for unity were being promoted by Catholics, the Octave and the Week.

Over the next years, Couturier developed and spread teaching on this spiritual ecumenism. Why am I giving Couturier such prominence in this talk? It is because at the Second Vatican Council in 1964, the bishops made Couturier's teaching the heart of their exposition of ecumenism in the Decree *Unitatis Redintegratio* of 1964. This teaching of paras 6 - 8 of the Council's Decree is summarized in the Catechism of the Catholic Church, para. 821:

“a permanent renewal of the Church in greater fidelity to her vocation, such renewal is the driving force of the movement toward unity,

conversion of heart as the faithful ‘try to live holier lives according to the Gospel’, for it is the unfaithfulness of the members to Christ's gift which causes divisions,

prayer in common, because ‘change of heart and holiness of life along with public and private prayer for the unity of Christians, should be regarded as the soul of the whole ecumenical movement, and merits the name ‘spiritual ecumenism’.”

With this teaching the Council abandoned the language of “return”, the idea underlying the Church Unity Octave that Christian unity meant the return of all others to the Roman obedience. At the heart of this major shift, I see two key elements, both pioneered by Couturier:

1. The change from return to renewal. Unity requires everyone to change, a process of deeper conversion. The return paradigm only required the others to change. This conversion is a process of purification in greater fidelity to Jesus Christ and the Gospel. This is the opposite of compromise with essential convictions. For Catholics the primatial role of the Pope is an essential conviction. But its exercise and practice requires a purification if reconciliation is to be achieved. Pope John Paul II recognized this when at the end of his encyclical on unity he called on the leaders and theologians of other Christian churches and communions to help him see how the papal ministry, which he there described as a ministry of unity could be exercised in ways that promoted reconciliation and unity.
2. A change from a Church-centered perspective to a Christ-centered perspective. However this statement did not mean for Couturier what it might mean to an Evangelical Christian. What Couturier was advocating was not a shift from a Church-centered perspective to one that was “non-denominational”; it was a shift from a Church-centered perspective to one of a Christ-centered Church. Couturier was not a marginal Catholic with a weak understanding of the role of the Church. He was speaking of a conversion from a Church-centered Church to a Christ-centered Church, which is the perspective of profound renewal.

Couturier taught clearly that the road to unity had to mean a humbler Church willing to confess the sins against unity and causing division through Christian history. In the 1930s he petitioned the French bishops to confess the sin involved in the massacre of Protestants on St Bartholomew’s day in 1572. They were not yet ready to do this. This had to wait until Vatican Two and especially the initiatives of John Paul II from 1994 on.

For Couturier, spiritual ecumenism was not one aspect of ecumenism. It was the spirit of prayer that is brought to all work for unity. So part of his legacy is a theological group in France, the Groupe des Dombes, that he helped to found that has issued a number of remarkable documents relating to ecumenism. What was different about this group was that the same scholars, Catholic and Protestant, came together over many years, and prayer and worship together played a major part in their meetings. Some of their published documents have been translated into English, including one on the theme For the Conversion of the Churches another remarkable document on Mary. This point about spiritual ecumenism is very important as many still speak of it as a (necessary) accompaniment to real ecumenical work such as theological dialogue and practical collaboration. I interpret John Paul II’s encyclical *Ut Unum Sint* as a powerful recall to Couturier’s vision of ecumenism, even though he does not mention his name. For *Ut Unum Sint* emphasizes the spiritual character of all interaction between separated Christians. The most obvious examples of this are what JP II says about the centrality of praying together, about humbling and repentance before God being an essential component in ecumenical dialogue (a largely missing dimension?) and about the importance for unity of the martyrs of all Christian traditions.

When Pope Benedict went to Cologne, Germany in 2005 for the World Youth Day, in one address he singled out Fr Couturier as a significant ecumenical pioneer.