Comment:

Harare 1998

The Eighth Assembly of the World Council of Churches has just taken place in Harare. How many Christians in Britain, Catholic or otherwise, even knew, let alone cared? If they were relying on the media, including the quality press and even the church newspapers, they could not have seen much about it.

Harare was in the news, certainly, but only because the former President of Zimbabwe, Canaan Banana, a Methodist minister, was facing trial on sodomy charges. The Catholic delegation at the WCC Assembly was led by Mario Conti, Bishop of Aberdeen, a remarkable honour. Yet, even in Scotland, the only news with a Catholic angle featured the case of a priest and his friend who sought substantial damages against *The Sun* for running a story suggesting that they had a sexual relationship. (They won their case; but the way it was reported must have ruined the priest's life.)

For that matter, how many of those who pray for Christian unity, particularly in January, remember that the last such assembly was in Canberra (1991)? Or could recall anything said or done then? Something happened at Amsterdam in 1948, when the 'fellowship of Churches which accept our Lord Jesus Christ as God and Saviour' was formally constituted: that might be engraved in the older generation's memories. People who take a close interest in these matters might recall that, in contrast with *Mortalium Animos*, the vehement denunciation of such reunion movements issued in 1928 by Pope Pius XI, Rome has sent authorised observers since New Delhi (1961) and has taken a greater and greater part in WCC work since then, though without becoming a member. Yet, outside the minority who are committed one way or another to ecumenism, most church-going Christians have no desire for any closer association with their fellow believers in other traditions than exists already.

Much has changed, even since 1961, particularly in the relationships among churches shaped by the Reformation, including of course the Roman Catholic Church. At Harare, however, the focus from the outset was on the unhappiness expressed by representatives of the Eastern Orthodox Church about the 'Protestant' and 'Western' assumptions and aspirations that they perceive in the ecumenical agenda. When the World Council was founded, as Fr Leonard Kishkovsky of the Orthodox Church in the United States of America recalled, fears were already being expressed by the Orthodox that Christians shaped by the Reformation and

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the Enlightenment would find it extremely difficult to understand those who had no experience of these events. Since, according to most estimates, membership of the Orthodox Church considerably exceeds that of all the Reformed Churches put together, this unhappiness might eventually lead to the withdrawal of the Orthodox and the reduction of the WCC to little more than a league of Protestant Christians with roots in Western Europe, whatever their efflorescence in Africa and elsewhere.

Many of the Protestant delegates at Harare were reported as wanting to see the Catholic Church in full membership. But, as Bishop Conti remarked, one problem would be the size of the Catholic contingent: 'With proportional representation, we would probably swamp the Council'.

In its own way, the Roman Catholic Church has been struggling, internally, to deal with the Reformation and the Enlightenment, at least since the early nineteenth century, and now, since Vatican II, with such an unstable mixture of fudge and bullheadedness, that something close to schism has come to the surface. While the great mass of Catholics would no doubt remain oblivious, initially, to the ecumenical agenda and to closer ties with other Churches, the effect of full membership of a World Council of Churches with little or even no representation by the Orthodox Church might accelerate the schismatic tendencies in the Catholic Church. Perhaps the Catholic Church should remain, in Bishop Conti's words, 'very happy to be standing alongside the Council as well as participating in many areas'—and leave it at that for decades yet.

When William Dalrymple reached the Monastery of Mar Saba, near the Dead Sea, one of the greatest centres of Orthodoxy since the fifth century, he had a memorable conversation with Fr Theophanes, the guest master, as he recounts in his splendid book *From the Holy Mountain : A Journey in the Shadow of Byzantium* (HarperCollins, 1997, paperback 1998). The monk informed him that the Pope is not just the Anti-Christ but, even worse, the President of the Freemasons: 'Each morning he worships the Devil in the form of a naked woman with the head of a goat'. When told that he was a Catholic, the monk assured Dalrymple that, unless he converted to Orthodoxy, he would follow the Pope down into the Valley of Doom.

Dalrymple lets the monk speak for himself, making no comment. In the photograph he does not look particularly crazy. But tourists and pilgrims find anti-Catholic tracts in the bookstalls in monasteries in Greece, less off the beaten track than Mar Saba, not so blatantly apocalyptic in tone but every bit as wacky. For decades yet, there will be work for ecumenists.

F.K.

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