Ecumenical Pioneers 2

Henry St. John O. P. (1891 - 1973)

Herbert Keldany

Before he was elected Prior Provincial for England at the age of sixty-seven, Fr Henry St John was known outside his province as an educationalist. He had taught at Laxton for twenty years, become Headmaster, and then founded another school at Llanarth near the Welsh border. Characteristically, he used to describe how he had been pitch-forked, quite without professional qualification, into teaching – the last thing he would have chosen – soon after his ordination. Plainly, there was more to him than his school record. He had just finished four years as sub-prior and Master of students at Hawkesyard Priory, where he showed himself sympathetic to the post-war generation of novices. Looking back, it is clear that his extra-curricular interests counted for much.

These interests were ecumenical, though most Catholics would have put them in inverted commas at the time. He had been present as an undergraduate from Cambridge at the Edinburgh Missionary Conference of 1910, which began the ecumenical movement among protestants. It is worth noting that in the preparatory stages this was described as the third ecumenical conference, but Anglican influences had the middle term dropped since neither Orthodox nor Roman Catholics were present. It only came back into general use, in both Latin and Greek, at Stockholm in 1925. Catholic understanding of this usage developed after the second World War and the formation of the World Council of Churches at Amsterdam in 1948.

In one sense Henry Fleming St John was born an ecumenist, at the time of the death of Manning, in an old-fashioned Tractarian parsonage at Dinmore to the north of Hereford. His great-uncle, Ambrose, had become one of Newman's closest friends and they were buried together six months earlier. The sixth of seven children, Henry had a happy childhood, formed by the Anglican Liturgy which was celebrated daily in a chapel that had been built by the Knights Templar. At the age of ten he knew the Psalms by heart and much of the Bible. He attended a choir-school near Gloucester run by an uncle in orders, and after having done well at Haileybury went up to St John's Cambridge in 1909. Here too,

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daily chapel was compulsory but in no way a burden to him. n.

Though hoping to be ordained, Henry read history and did well in the Tripos. He also attended theological lectures by such scholars as Birkett and Swete, and joined an Anglo-Catholic group called the Society of the Holy Spirit. His participation in the Edinburgh Conference had introduced him to the Free Churches and to a wider Christian world, thus broadening his ecumenical horizon. After taking his degree, he spent a year at St Stephen's House, Oxford, where he experienced his first bout of 'roman fever'; a second year at Ely Theological College, and then one more year as a deacon at St Mary's Torquay. When war broke out in 1914 he tried to enlist, but was firmly restrained by the masterful Bishop of Exeter, Lord William Cecil, who ordained him in the following year and appointed him to a curacy in Penzance. By this time, however, the 'fever' had returned and he went home to think out his future.

In January 1917 while celebrating Holy Communion in the chapel at Dinmore, he realised that he was doing so for the last time as an Anglican. He took the Evening Service, shared his decision with his mother, and a few days later, armed with a letter from a Catholic cousin, Raymond Devas O.P., then serving as a chaplain, made his way to Hawkesyard Priory to see the only Catholic priest he knew, Fr Vincent McNabb who received him into the Catholic Church on February 17th.

He went up to London and joined up soon afterwards. He was to endure the traumas of mud and blood at Paschendale as a private in the Signals, but all he would speak of later was a sense of joy at having followed his conscience. On demobilisation he applied to join the Dominicans, was accepted as a novice, and spent seven years at Hawkesyard Priory integrating a strict Thomist discipline with an already profound theological vision. After his ordination Fr Henry was able to say his first Catholic Mass in the chapel at Dinmore, (his brother had since also become a Catholic), and use once more the chalice his father had used. This carried a Latin memento of his tutor J. R. Woodford, subsequently Bishop of Ely. Henry used this chalice daily thereafter as "a perpetual prayer for unity".

Before becoming absorbed in his new career as a teacher at Laxton he wrote the first of what was to be a long series of articles for the review *Blackfriars* which Fr Bede Jarrett had founded with deliberate ecumenical intent. The March 1928 issue carried his short review of the official report on the Malines Conversations. Though far from optimistic, the article nevertheless emphasised the positive effort that had gone into the first dialogue between Rome and Canterbury. His isolated note in the current *English Catholic Comment* drew on its author, the first round of fire from

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the extreme conservative elements which were to dog his progress in this field. But though discouraged, he went on his own course with an easy conscience. He was convinced that understanding the Anglican ethos was essential to any ecumenical progress. Much later he used to sum it up in one line: "The Church of England is a microcosm of the whole problem of unity".

In the early thirties, assisted by younger friars, Fr Henry became absorbed in teaching, but also enjoyed an ever widening circle of friends. He found time in the centenary year of the Tractarian movement to write in *Blackfriars* on Newman and Froude, underlining their debt to Keble. The following year a brief review of Gille's *Plea for Reunion* drew a heavy counter-attack from Ernest Oldmeadow, the editor of the *Tablet,* who resigned his tenure of that far from eirenic chair when Cardinal Hinsley came to London.

The clouds began to lift. Fr Henry made a friend in Pere Yves Congar who paid several visits to England in connection with the writing and translation into English of his *Divided Christendom.* In return Congar invited Fr Henry and Fr Victor White to an ecumenical session at Le Saulchoir. And Henry provided him with a warm welcome when, after the War, having survived the austerities of Colditz, Congar was banished to England because he was considered too *avant-garde.*

Meanwhile, encouraged by the new climate, he launched a series of dialogues which were to pioneer the way for ARCIC, and much other stratospheric work that has become normal today. This spade work was done quietly between 1935-52. Alternating between Laxton and Mirfield, (with which he had links going back to the 1910 Edinburgh Conference), he gathered a relatively small group of theologians, Catholic and Anglican, for systematic round-table discussion. They covered much of the ground discussed more formally later, and the circle was gradually widened. In addition to Fr Thomas Gilbey O.P. there came Abbot Christopher Butler OSB, Fr Maurice Bevenot SJ and Mgr Francis Davis of Oscott. The Anglicans included Fr Lionel Thornton and Fr Geoffrey Curtis from Mirfield, Fr Gabriel Herbert from Kelham, Dom Gregory Dix from Nashdon and others. Their deliberations established that the eirenic method produced results, and that serious work done together could benefit others.

A long correspondence on "Catholicism Today" in the *Times* in November 1949 showed there was a wide desire for rapprochement, and soon after an *Instruction* from the Holy Office provided the first opening for Catholics to enter the ecumenical movement. It was hedged with qualifications, but it said that bishops ought to give special care and attention "to this work which is a particular duty of the Church".

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Fr Henry took up this theme when speaking during the Octave for Christian Unity at Blackfriars, Oxford in 1950. Basing himself on his own experience of theological dialogue he spoke of the reasons which should induce Catholics to take their part in conferences with representatives of other allegiances in divided Christendom. Failure was not inevitable: "the principle and basis of all eirenic work is the desire to understand, not only intellectually but humanly, beings bound together, whatever their subsequent differences, by a common allegiance to our Lord".[1]

He gained support for his stand and soon afterwards set about collecting some of the papers he had written since 1928. His *Essays in Christian Unity*[2] was greeted as a break with the past, and a proof that the method he advocated had achieved a measure of success. It brought to light the germ of all subsequent ARC discussion, and because it was largely one man's work, he won from Archbishop Heenan in due course the accolade "The Father of Ecumenism in Britain", in a letter which Henry understandably treasured.

The friendships that he had developed and a clearer understanding of the problem, led Fr Henry in the 1950s to broaden his ecumenical activity. He was now sub-Prior at Hawkesyard Priory and began at Spode House a series of shorter, broader-based meetings, in which his previous experience was made available to seminary professors, university chaplains and others in ecumenical circumstances. These gatherings were much appreciated and prepared many priests for the work which began with the announcement of the Vatican Council and the establishment of the Unity Secretariat.

Then followed four busy and, for a man of his age, exacting years as Provincial of the English Dominicans. He travelled Britain, the Continent, the West Indies and South Africa, and though his generous spirit was stimulated there can be no doubt it tired him. But in the process he had gained recognition and shed some of his diffidence – not least about the necessity of Christian Unity in the face of global issues. About this he remained confident and also clear-headed. He had no illusions about unity; it was not just around the corner, nor a matter of kindness or clarity of expression. The obstacles were enormous. Writing of the initiative of Pope John he pin-pointed the biggest obstacle as an internal one. "To bring about Unity we ourselves have to reform, to renew our own life in the Church and reform the anomalies and abuses that have grown up in it." When he spoke on the eve of the Council to a meeting of the Catholic University Federation, held at Oxford in March 1961, he was already looking forward to "a new conciliarity which would express anew the togetherness of the whole Body of Christ", but he brooked no compromise and found it in him to

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warn "those who think that the Church is going to be British".

When the Unity Secretariat was formed in Rome in anticipation of Vatican II, many of his friends were recruited to it by Mgr Jan Willebrands. Archbishop Heenan became a Vice-President and his first move at home was to form in 1961 a Bishops' Committee for Christian Unity. The following summer two meetings were organised from which all subsequent work stems. One, at Worth in Sussex, was an ecumenical gathering composed of theologians, Catholic and Anglican, eight a side, and confined to a study of the Eucharist. The other, better known, was the first Heythrop Conference, confined to Catholic priests nominated by their bishops. Its object was to brief them on the latest developments. Cardinal Bea presided, Fr Henry gave one of the key talks on "Eirenic Dialogue", and the papers were promptly published in a paperback.[3]

Two other high level conferences took place that summer. One at St Edmund's Hall, Oxford, also on the Eucharist, anticipated the formation of ARCIC. The other, held at Mirfield, was the last of the series of international conferences organised by Mgr Willbrands which paved the way for the Unity Secretariat. Père Dalmais, O.P. provided the key paper on the "Apostolate of the Twelve".

The progress of the Council's ecumenical work was watched with much interest by Fr Henry. He delighted in the clause in para. 13 of *De Ecumenismo:* "The Anglican Communion has a special place among those churches which continue to retain, in part, Catholic traditions and structure". Meanwhile Henry contributed a a Foreword to the English edition of Pere Villain's *Unity – A History and Reflection,*[4] and summed up his own ideas in a closely argued paper-back *The Church and Christian Unity.*[5]

Soon after the promulgation of the decree on Ecumenism, Cardinal Heenan set up a pilot ecumenical commission in Westminster, and invited Fr Henry to act as Consultor on Anglican questions; and when he formed the first Ecumenical Commission for England and Wales at Heythrop three years later, he gave him the same position. Fr Henry served on both bodies as long as his strength allowed, producing memoranda on "Continuous Dialogue" and "Multilateral Discussion" which are still consulted today.

At eighty he was forced to give up active work, but his apostolate of unity continued, even increased. He had always said it must be 'costing', a favourite word of his. Now he could pray more about it, and offer the pains of old age. Those close to him at Carisbrooke and Cambridge watched him decline serenely. He had seen so many of his dreams begin to come true. He died in Cambridge on March 10th, 1973.

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Shortly afterwards a manuscript found among his papers was published under the apt title *Testament of an Ecumenist.*[6] It sums up his life's work. In due course someone will amplify it into a book, preferably while some of those who knew and worked with him are still alive. A short extract speaks for him:

> *Our vision of the future must be that there will be the Catholic Church, the same in essentials, structure and truth. The other Churches will move towards her, and the Church will open wide her arms, accept all that is good and true – in custom and usage, in ways of thinking, worship and government – that they have practised in their separate life. By this the Church of Christ will be greatly enlarged and enriched.*

1 The Spirit of Unity – *Blackfriars,* Oxford p. 34.
2 Blackfriars Publications 1955.
3 *Christian Unity – A Catholic View* ed. J. C. Heenan Sheed & Ward.
4 Harvill 1963.
5 Darton, Longman & Todd 1964.
6 *Spode House Review* May 1973.

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