

## **“Be United Again in your Belief and Practice”**

“I appeal to you, brethren, for the sake of our Lord Jesus Christ, to make up the differences between you, and instead of disagreeing among yourselves, to be united again in your belief and practice.” So urges St Paul in today’s second reading.

Growing up as a Catholic in the 1950s, I never felt entirely at home in this country. In those days most people identified as Christian and, as a Catholic, I felt I didn’t quite belong. If asked if I was a Christian, I would have answered, “No, I’m a Catholic” because I was aware that we were different, regarded as rather suspect by the rest of society. There was a kind of racism or, rather, a religious discrimination in operation among the general population. It was not uncommon for someone from a different tradition who married a Catholic to be estranged from their family. There was a sort of unspoken feeling that Catholics were foreign, ‘not one of us’, people with loyalties to Rome or Ireland before Queen and country.

I am about to say that all that has changed, and indeed it has by and large, but I was shocked to discover that, rather like anti-semitism, anti-Catholicism has not quite gone away and continues to lurk menacingly just below the surface of polite society. I was dismayed to read just this week some of the reactions to the candidacy of Rebecca Long-Bailey for the Labour leadership because, as a Catholic, she is against abortion. One journalist and labour party member, Paul Mason, wrote, and I quote:

I don’t want Labour’s policy on reproductive rights dictated by the Vatican...There’s no place for the misogynistic thugs of the Vatican in Labour politics.

Another journalist, Oliver Kamm, the Times leader writer no less, tweeted:

These are extraordinary & grotesque opinions. Catholic priests have no right whatever to have their views heard as priests but only as citizens. Their hostility to legal abortion is morally reprehensible...

Firstly, I was not aware that Rebecca Long-Bailey was a priest; it would be a first. Secondly, it seems to me a dangerously perverted definition of morality if it is now morally reprehensible to uphold the right to life of a

defenceless child. These are views one would not be surprised to hear voiced in the reign of Elizabeth I; in the reign of Elizabeth II they are wholly unacceptable, sectarian, discriminatory and, indeed, morally reprehensible in the true meaning of the words.

However that may be, the once scandalous divisions between the different offspring of the Christian family in this country and across the globe have now all but disappeared with one or two sad exceptions. The rapprochement between the Catholics and the Church of England, for instance, has gone from strength to strength in my life time. It is almost unbelievable that an Archbishop of Canterbury in the last century once described the Pope as the whore of Babylon and a Pope in the previous century once described the Archbishop's ordination as 'absolutely null and utterly void'. Now the two primates can now embrace and pray together with mutual love and respect with a fellowship and regard that is genuine and sincere. Two particularly radiant moments in this relationship stand out for me. The first was seeing Pope John Paul and Archbishop Runcie praying together in Canterbury Cathedral during the papal visit of 1982, and the second, the attendance of Archbishop Rowan at the inauguration of Pope Benedict in 2005.

Of course there have been many other movements of rapprochement between member Churches of the Body of Christ. In 1972, the English branches of the Presbyterian Church and the Congregationalists merged to become the United Reformed Church, and the Methodists and Anglicans in this country continue to explore the path of unity together. In Waterlooville, until recently, there had been limited contact between the various members of the Body of Christ but, for the past two years, the leaders of the main churches have been meeting regularly to pray together, share a meal, exchange best practice, discuss initiatives for evangelisation and share concerns and issues that have arisen in their own communities. There is a very genuine love and respect for each other and it is so supportive to learn that we share the same problems in retaining and growing our membership, evangelising our culture and making the the Lord Jesus and his message of love and life known to the world. We are united in our love for the Lord Jesus and for the people he came to save.

Some people maintain that the movement for Christian Unity has settled on a plateau and stagnated, but perhaps this is a period of consolidation when those relationships necessarily need to bed in and grow roots. In this way

one degree of toleration leads gradually to the next and we gain the trust, the confidence and the courage to move forward under the guidance of the Holy Spirit so that, having largely settled the differences between us, as St Paul urges in the second reading, we move on to fulfil the second part of his exhortation, 'to be united again in your belief and practice'. For only if we can do this will the message we proclaim and the Christ we preach have any credibility at all in the world which needs Our Lord and saviour now more than ever.