

TRINITY XIX (1)
Tact and Tolerance (Other Religions)
“Other sheep I have.”

The Liberal Catholic Church has operated as a worshipping community since 1916 and has certain features which, until fairly recently, were pretty well unique within the Christian churches and denominations. These include freedom of thought, open communion, unpaid clergy, and an enlightened and non-judgemental approach to Christian life, thought and doctrine etc. But these things, and even the concepts of Reincarnation and the Law of Cause & Effect, are now considered seriously by many thinking Christians today.

It could be argued that, with the advent of the World Council of Churches, and especially Vatican II, our work as a distinct faith-community of the sacramental tradition is done. Our pioneering work has borne fruit in so many ways, both directly and indirectly. We have set in motion certain ideas, principles and approaches, coming as they do from the Wisdom of the Ages as well as contemporary experience. As one writer puts it: "As our earlier teachers and leaders saw, the great movement of mankind towards the inner truth, the 'sophia' and the 'gnosis', is actively in being, bringing an age of new apprehension and fresh spiritual dynamic" (Liberal Catholic Vol.LV, No.2). Our Church has had a role in this development of a "fresh spiritual dynamic".

Many of the Christian Churches have come to acknowledge, as the LCC does, the truth/reality of our Lord's statement "other sheep I have which are not of this fold". This being so, it would seem that we, as a Church, have achieved what our founding bishops intended us to achieve - we have changed the Christian Church, or at least acted as a catalyst for such change. But is our work really done?

Our own spiritual insights lead us to accept, and even embrace, the experience of Divine Truth to be found along other Paths and in other Traditions. We are not afraid to venture into other cultures, their religions and their experience of the Divine, on their terms. Generally speaking, other Christians now "acknowledge" that God reveals Himself in some way to other people, but I don't think many of them would in fact 'embrace' the teachings and practices of these other faiths. Christianity still tends to be *exclusivist*, whereas the Liberal Catholic Church is *inclusivist*. I say this as one who is first and foremost a Christian. I am not a Buddhist or a Hindu, but I recognise, as does the LCC, that although there is only one holy mountain, there are other paths that ascend it to the summit and to God. "Other sheep I have". And so, notwithstanding what I have said about our Church's achievements, I see the LCC as having a number of tasks yet to perform and with greater effectiveness, and one of those is to continue to dialogue and share with other Faiths. The scourge of fundamentalism (political and religious) is still with us today.

This Church has a number of objectives and they include the following:

- (i) being a church which is "To serve Christ and his Church and to feed his flock" (Statement of Principles);
- (ii) being a church that presents Christianity within the context of the Ancient Wisdom;
- (iii) being a church that *initiates* people into the mysteries of the faith and leads them to the Kingdom of God within, and also in bringing heaven and earth together, especially through liturgy;
- (iv) being a church that is a channel of healing, grace and power to a very high degree, not only for its members, but also for the benefit of the whole world;
- (v) being a church which will work for the betterment of humanity and its spiritual evolution, and this means working alongside people of other Faiths;

- (vi) being a church that is acting as a bridge for Christianity to the next millennium, to the new humanity, to a new era in spiritual development;
- (vii) being a church that awakens people's spirit with the Primordial Tradition, not only the theory but also the practice;
- (viii) being a church that does not see a dichotomy between science and religion, between the sacred and the profane, between spirit and matter.

And so, we as Liberal Catholics, see this 'oneness' of life and 'at-one-ment' with the Source of All Life, in terms of the *whole* of humanity, the *whole* of life, the *whole* of the universe, and not just in terms of the individual or our own faith-community. Our understanding of the Christian Faith is that it has more than a personal dimension; it also has a *cultural dimension* that is all-embracing, and a *cosmic dimension* that goes beyond our own lives, our own planet, even this universe. We also proclaim that our *personal redemption* does not take place in isolation but in the context of the upliftment of all humanity (vis "no man is an island"). And so the statement of Jesus that "other sheep I have" doesn't cause us any problems at all. In fact, it puts our personal and collective responsibilities in the context of the whole of humanity, as our Lord also said "feed my sheep".

As a Church, we seek communion not only with the inner dimensions of our own being and with each other, but also with the worlds which surround us, with the Holy Ones, with the Angelic Beings we invoke in our services, and with the Communion of Saints. This and more. True Religion is, by definition, multifaceted, and Christianity is part of, but not the only part of, what we may call True Religion - for Religion is that which 'binds' us, connects us, with God and all creation.

And so, we believe that there are many ways in which we may journey to the Heavenly City. And in saying this, I do not think that we are falling into a form of relativism, one which would lead to the conclusion that one religion is as good as another. We are really not saying this, for to do so would be to belittle all religions and their unique contributions to the spreading of Divine Truth in all its forms. I am particular about *my* religion, and so is this Church. (J.I. Wedgwood declared that we are a *Christian* Church, and it is going to stay that way!) Yes, we are *Christian*, in fact we are *Trinitarian* Christians. But we also see the Divine Light appearing through and being revealed by the teachings, sacred texts, and liturgies belonging to peoples of other Faiths. The late Dom Bede Griffiths - a Benedictine monk and priest, is one holy person who has written so eloquently on this interaction between faiths, of East meeting West. He lived a life of interaction with other faiths and cultures while maintaining his own personal integrity and allegiance to the Christian Faith as one of its priests.

We, the people of this Church, use particular traditions, teachings and insights, and these are based on the Ancient Wisdom but expressed in the light of contemporary knowledge and experience. And so we perform the sacred dance before the altar of God according *to our own lights, in our own understanding and experience, in our own Christian revelation*. We have, as it were, been given our own theme or melody in the symphony of life and worship. We also dance with the Angels, we worship with the Saints before the Throne of the Most High. And our dance is enhanced and enriched by the participation of those of other faiths and cultures who will join us, for by so doing we have counterpoint - a mighty interplay of divine melodies, a veritable symphony!

I pray that we may continue on our Quest, our work, and in a way which brings us even more closely to those of other Faiths, sharing our many and varied experiences of God among us, and embracing all people unconditionally as our Lord Christ has instructed us to do.

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