

29.

16 augusti 1971

De actione oecumenica in Societate.

Allocutio qua P. Generalis aperuit Quartum Conventum Internationalem Iesuitarum qui rebus Oecumenicis incumbunt: « Fourth International Congress of Jesuit Ecumenists ». — Dublini (Milltown Park) diebus 16-20 augusti 1971.

This is a very happy occasion for all of us, for me as well as for you. We meet as fellow-Jesuits who are deeply concerned about the common cause of Christian unity and who are trying to express this concern in the different ways appropriate to our different ministries.

We are particularly happy to be in Ireland. Wherever we have come from, we have already met Irish people. They are to be found all over the world, engaged everywhere in the work of evangelization. We are happy to visit their homeland, the source of their great missionary zeal, and we would hope to help forward, by our presence and our prayers, the valiant efforts in the cause of Christian reconciliation now being made on all sides throughout the whole of Ireland.

And we owe a special gratitude to the community of Milltown Park and more particularly to the Irish School of Ecumenics for the successful organization of this meeting. I would like to use this occasion to congratulate this institute for its successful first year and for the hopeful prospects it offers for the future.

One might well ask at the outset of this conference why Jesuits from many parts of the world should choose to meet together to discuss their common involvement in the ecumenical movement. What could be less ecumenical than a meeting composed only of Jesuits? The Church has made it clear that prayer and work for Christian unity is a call of Christ to all in his Church without exception: so, though one is glad to see individual Jesuits involved with other Christians both in the official dialogues of the Church and on their local scene, can there be a special role for the Society of Jesus in the ecumenical movement? Ecumenism, moreover, demands so much local commitment, local development and progress, which necessarily varies greatly with local circumstances: so, how can Jesuits serve the Church, or serve the world, or help each other, by an international meeting like this?

In considering these questions I have been led first of all to reflect (as indeed I have had occasion to remark to various groups

of Superiors of our order) that ecumenism is not a separate field of apostolate but is a dimension of all the Church's mission and therefore of all our apostolates. Our Society has the opportunity of making a considerable contribution to the one ecumenical movement, precisely because it is involved all over the world in such a variety of work. Hence there is always some ecumenical value in any international meeting of this kind, in so far as any of us is thereby enabled to see the wider context and implication of his own more specialized activity. It is of great profit to those of us in Europe to share the ecumenical experience of North America and Australia, where the barriers arising from language, culture and history have largely been broken down. And it is of particular value to this conference that it includes some whose service of Christ in his Church lies in other areas, especially in countries struggling for development. So, we can share with each other a wide variety of ecumenical experience and help each other with the brotherly encouragement and support which you need and which I need in order to sustain our common dedication to the cause of Christian unity.

Again, it is worth noting that any religious order has its own contribution to make in the Christian dialogue. That contribution should follow the lines of its own unique charism and characteristic spirituality. And the Society, which draws its existence and character from the Spiritual Exercises of St. Ignatius Loyola, should be reflecting on how its distinctive spirituality can acquire a fully ecumenical dimension.

We should not be satisfied with the idea of having some groups of Jesuits (however active they may be) working in this field of ecumenism: there should be a spirit in all of us, priests and brothers, which permeates all our prayer and all our ministries and work. But if it is true that there are signs that Jesuits everywhere are becoming increasingly aware of their ecumenical obligations, it is also true that past and present achievements have depended chiefly on individual initiative and in relatively few cases on a corporate effort of the Society of Jesus. We have relevant documents from the Church and the Society. The mind of the Church and specifically of Pope Paul VI is well known to all of us; it is not knowledge which seems to be lacking but decision and conviction, the realization that Christian disunity does indeed *block the way to the faith for many*¹. We have to know, but today we have to act, following the spirit and the directives of the

¹ *Vat. II, Decree on Missionary Activity of the Church*, n. 6.

Church. But we are still very far from this ideal. In this regard I would recommend very seriously to those in charge of the formation of our young fellow-Jesuits that they incorporate this spirit in their formation programmes and activities because *An education in ecumenism is not a matter of the intellect alone, but must be part of one's spiritual formation as well, since a truly ecumenical spirit cannot be had without a change of heart*². I would recommend first of all that those in charge of formation be imbued with such a spirit, because nobody can give what he does not have.

In regard to the Brothers, we may recall the recommendation of the same General Congregation: *Due consideration being had for their religious formation and the offices they hold, Brothers are to be informed in the matter of ecumenism so that by prayer, suitable understanding, and such personal contacts as fall to them, they too may participate in this activity of the Society*³.

And in general I would ask that every one of us read the Decree on Ecumenism of the Thirty-first General Congregation and reflect upon it, asking ourselves: « What have I done to put it into practice? What should I do? »

Through this renewal of our formation, we will become more ecumenically-minded in our whole life and work and give our own contribution to the important task of the instruction and formation of the faithful in the ecumenical spirit.

Then too, the ecumenical movement is meant to move. And I hope it would not be in any way inappropriate to suggest, with the ecumenical movement particularly in view, that it is the nature of our Jesuit vocation not to be too closely bound to accepted patterns of ministry, to be as sensitive as we can to the newly emerging needs of the Church, and to do some of the pioneering and exploratory work to which God is calling his People. So we in the Society have always understood the need to be, here and now, sensitive and responsive to the greater glory of God. A constant openness to the Spirit of Christ, with a great docility and discernment, is characteristic of our spirituality. We must be ever alert to the voice and inspirations of the Spirit because He has His own ways to guide us to real unity. Who knows the how and when of the realization of Christian unity? *Who knows the mind of the Lord? ... Who has been his counsellor?*⁴. *The Spirit blows where*

² General Congregation XXXI, decree 26, n. 5; cf. Vat. II Decree on Ecumenism, n. 7.

³ *Ib.* n. 7.

⁴ *Rom.* 11, 34.

it wills ⁵, and we have to be very humble and open to receive these inspirations. This will give us the right ecumenical attitude. If work for Christian unity is to go forward with energy and enthusiasm and attract the younger generation, then the ecumenical movement must become bolder, more representative and more binding on the life of the Church. We should consider this appeal as addressed in a special way to our Society, in order to break out of the apathy for things ecumenical and the lack of conviction about the urgency of the problem that afflict some of our fellow-Jesuits.

Let us consider now some of the fields in which ecumenical development is of most urgent importance. One large area of our apostolate is spiritual direction and especially through the giving of retreats and missions, and the maintenance of retreat houses. Some ideas do come immediately to mind: can we not now use some of our Jesuit houses for ecumenical activities where Christians of different communities, in separate groups as well as in common, can receive spiritual guidance? Can we not help the development of the religious life of poverty, chastity and obedience in other Christian communions?

The general field of education is certainly one in which our Society is involved at every level and in so many countries. We therefore bear a particular responsibility for an integral ecumenical education of the young and of the young adult. They can often relate more easily on a personal level with other Christians than those of an older generation. And so in this apostolate we have the double task of building bridges within our own Catholic Church, and at the same time of creating the conditions for an ecumenical formation that is in every sense fully catholic. There is surely here an immense field for exploration and discovery. Moreover, I would earnestly appeal to all those engaged in the important Jesuit apostolate of secondary education not only to see to it that their students acquire the ecumenical spirit but also to address themselves, in collaboration with their counterparts in other Churches, to the more fundamental, difficult and urgent problem of discovering what the true nature of Christian education is and what its appropriate forms are in this world of the late twentieth century.

In considering the questions raised by the holding of this conference, I have so far touched more generally on the part that I see the Society is called upon to play in the ecumenical movement. But, if I were asked to select one role above all others for the

⁵ *John*, 3, 8.

Society in this field, various considerations would lead me to concentrate on theological reflection. In choosing the phrase « *theological reflection* », I am not, of course, forgetting the responsibilities of the Society for the teaching of theology and the training of priests in many parts of the world: here we need to give a clear and bold response to Part II of the Ecumenical Directory, which gives such warm and wide encouragement to Christian cooperation in higher studies and pastoral training, opening new possibilities which have not yet been fully exploited.

I say « *theological reflection* », as I said a year ago at the Procurators' Congregation in Rome because of the request made by many people in positions of leadership in the Church for scholarly and concerted theological reflection on the new problems that face the Church in her relation to the modern world as well as on the problems this world itself is facing which are our own problems. The Society seems particularly well equipped in some ways to meet this urgent need. This calls for a thorough, scholarly study of these problems which will provide profound doctrinal guidance for practical action and common witness. It will also show common positive points, which will be a great encouragement to go all the way to the unity desired by Christ. And we cannot forget in this regard to *examine the possibilities of a common Christian approach to the phenomenon of unbelief*, as Pope Paul VI suggested in his speech at the headquarters of the World Council of Churches in Geneva (June 10, 1969).

This deep theological reflection will give us the right orientation and attitude of mind. I have been told that in many areas there are no longer significant differences between scholars from various Christian communities. If that means that they have been able to deepen their Christian communion and their common witness to the gospel of Christ in rigorous fidelity to God revealing Himself in His divine Son, I can only rejoice that Christian scholars are sensitive and faithful to what the Spirit is saying to the Churches. I would be saddened, however, if it were to mean a tendency to make light of different traditions long held by the various Christian communities and an impatience with these differences leading to neglect of them for the sake of some general unity. For this would be a sign of a certain impoverishment taking place precisely at the moment when we are deeply interested in searching out ways to preserve legitimate diversity joined to deep unity. Profound theological reflection assures that our ecumenical efforts will not be impoverished, but really enriched.

A combination of factors has, in our day, at once broadened

the scope for theological reflection and increased our need for it. The pace and trend of renewal in all the Churches, the progress of dialogue on matters of faith and order between Christians of all traditions, the development of the natural and human sciences and the advances of technology have raised new questions and re-opened questions which we thought answered. And these are not just academic, esoteric questions. They are practical and they concern everyone. On the answers to these questions depends to a great extent the future of the Church, the world and mankind. In God's saving plan what is the meaning, the role, the reality of the non-Christian religions, of the Christian traditions not in full communion with the Roman Catholic Church, of the various secular agencies promoting social reform, progress and peace? Everyone every day is giving an implicit-answer to these questions. The grave danger is that the answer may not be a response to the question as now posed or that it may be superficial and unsound, or that it may even block further sound development.

To face these questions our Society has, in God's Providence, considerable resources and corresponding obligations. All over the world there are Jesuits and Jesuit institutions working in close contact with non-Christians. They can come to realize the spiritual value and true role of the non-Christian religions. Their experience is vital in developing and adopting a new theology of mission. There are also many Jesuits and Jesuit institutions involved in the development of the natural and human sciences and of technology. Because they are not outsiders, they can approach and help us all to approach the questions being raised in this area with the required sympathy and understanding. Again there are Jesuits and Jesuit institutions involved in theological teaching and research and already in many places working together, with their Protestant counterparts.

We are experiencing in this regard something very consoling. Seeing the way in which our professors and young students of theology deal in so many places with their colleagues of other denominations brings to my mind the words of Paul VI: *To come together, to meet others, to greet them, and to speak with them—what is easier, more natural and more human? Yes, but there is something further: to listen to each other, to pray for each other, and after such long years of separation, and such painful quarrels, to begin anew to love one another*⁶. This dialogue and this understanding is the best way to prepare for fruitful theological discus-

⁶ Paul VI: Address to the Delegates and Observers to the Second Vatican Council, *October 17, 1963*.

sion. Charity is an irresistible force which brings us first to a union of hearts which inspires the union of minds. It is a wonderful step forward that today we can smile together at some of the less amicable moments in our histories without any feeling of superiority towards our forefathers, but with gratitude to God. It is interesting to see how our younger Jesuits speak so casually about ecumenism, and I would say almost unconsciously are practising it.

Because of their situation and competence our Jesuit professors and institutions are able, among other things, to appreciate, and help us to appreciate, how important theological pluralism can be for the successful outcome of the ecumenical dialogue and of the dialogue between Church and world. There are finally Jesuits with a special insight into the traditions of the East and Jesuit institutions devoted to sharing and deepening this insight. They are in a position not only to help the dialogue between East and West and assist the approach to full communion between the Catholic and the Orthodox Churches, but also to enrich the dialogue between the various Western traditions, ensuring that it is not only Western Catholicism that other Churches encounter in their many dialogues with the Roman Catholic Church, but the full range of catholic theological tradition.

Someone may say: Today, when men are weary of the great number of spoken or written declarations and are looking for 'deeds', what is really important is common witness. As a rather recent study document, prepared by a mixed theological committee and accepted by the Joint Working Group of the Roman Catholic Church and the World Council of Churches, says: *Christians cannot remain divided in their witness. Any situations where contact and cooperation between Churches are refused must be regarded as abnormal.* But here again theological reflection not only can provide a form of common witness in the specific field of scholarly research, but is required to give a clear basis and guidance to the whole range of this common witness in order to avoid *procedures that are superficial, rash and counter-productive ... in this sudden enthusiasm for reconciliation ... so that the many good desires and the many promising possibilities may not perish in misunderstanding, indifference and in a false irenicism*⁷.

To cite an example, the Society is in a variety of ways involved in the social apostolate of the Church, and here too it must learn to exercise its mission in full cooperation with other Chris-

⁷ Paul VI: January 22, 1969.

tians. Again, it is precisely this ecumenical social apostolate that has given rise to so many new theological problems. And there is great need for serious theological study of these questions, in order to support and to guide the social involvement of Christians.

But it is the most basic of all these theological problems that you are here to discuss. The Church does not exist to preserve itself in a kind of splendid isolation, but to preach the Gospel to the world. Christians are not seeking to unite for their own comfort, but in order to carry out more fully the Church's mission according to the will of Christ. And if we are to understand that mission better today, we have to ask not only, '*What is the world?*' but also, '*What is the Church?*' And, to use the term of St. Ignatius Loyola, what is our holy mother the Hierarchical Church, and how is she speaking to us? Hence I can think of few more relevant exercises today than this discussion of post-conciliar ecclesiology. I hope that its fruits can in some way be of benefit to others besides yourselves, and prove of wider service in the Church.

To whom much is given, of him much will be required. A deep conversion of our hearts to ecumenism is required of us so that the ecumenical movement may become more binding on the life of the whole Society of Jesus. We are being asked to renew ourselves radically in this spirit, to practice what we preach to others: reform, cooperation and dialogue so that Christians may come closer together that the world may believe. Let us pray for each other that our faith may not fail and let us strengthen each other by word and example for this task of ecumenizing all our formation, prayer life, institutions and all our ministries for the ever greater glory of God. In the true Ignatian spirit, *I must be convinced that in Christ our Lord ... only one Spirit holds sway, which governs and rules for the salvation of souls. For it is by the same Spirit and Lord who gave the Ten Commandments that our holy Mother Church is ruled and governed*⁸.

Now we prefer to look not to the past, but to the future, and to what ought to be. We look to something new which has yet to be born, a dream which has yet to be realized. We say with St. Paul, *forgetting what is behind me and reaching out for that which lies ahead, I press towards the goal to win the prize which is God's call to the life above in Christ Jesus*⁹.

⁸ SPIRITUAL EXERCISES, n. 365.

⁹ Phil. 3, 13-14; cf. Paul VI: October 17, 1963.