

## **Spirituality is for Angels--The Angels of Michael**

**Robert W. Bertram**

[Printed in Ecumenism, The Spirit and Worship, 126-169. Edited by Leonard J. Swidler. Pittsburgh: Duquesne University Press, 1967.]

[Robert W. Bertram (Lutheran), Associate Professor of Systematic and Historical Theology at Concordia Seminary in St. Louis, did advanced study in Catholic theology at the University of Munich (1965-66). His publications include editing *Theology in the Life of the Church* (Fortress, 1963).]

September 29 was Michaelmas or, as some of us know it, the Feast of Saint Michael and All Angels. For a saint's day this one enjoys an unusually ecumenical popularity—"throughout the church," says one authority sweepingly.<sup>1</sup> The festival's ecumenicity and especially its feting of the angelic spirits make it a fit occasion for the theme of this seminar, Ecumenism and Spirituality. I propose to exploit this historic (if arbitrary) coincidence.

"Propose" is the right word. For in what follows I should like to venture not a documentary on how much "ecumenism and spirituality" are going on statistically and organizationally but rather a theological proposal of what, on the strength of our common biblical and churchly heritage, we dare to *believe* is going on. This proposal is itself, I suppose, a venture in ecumenism and spirituality—the riskiest kind. However, I should not pretend that the faith here expressed has no basis in churchly fact. Faith has eyes to see, and what it sees is in fact, already and very visibly, a flourishing spirituality of the most ecumenical sort. While, as you would expect, I speak as a confessing Lutheran—that is, confessing the gospel as it comes to the church's Lutherans—I trust that the host of witnesses I invoke, both in footnotes and text, is ecumenical enough to allow, for example, for even a very singular exegesis of the name "Michael" and for a singularly militant and mundane concept of "spirituality."

The kind of spirituality, however, to which this seminar is dedicated may seem at first to have little in common with the kind of spirits who come to mind on Michaelmas. Offhand, so it would seem. And that initial misgiving seems only to worsen when we see the scriptural text which traditionally is appointed as the epistle lesson for this festival. Revelation 12:7-12.

Now war arose in heaven, Michael and his angels fighting against the dragon; and the dragon and his angels fought, but they were defeated and there was no longer any place for them in heaven. And the great dragon was thrown down, that ancient serpent, who is

---

<sup>1</sup> F. L. Cross (editor). *The Oxford Dictionary of the Christian Church* (London: Oxford University Press, 1957), p. 897.

called the Devil and Satan, the deceiver of the whole world—he was thrown down to the earth, and his angels were thrown down with him. And I heard a loud voice in heaven, saying, "Now the salvation and the power and the kingdom of our God and the authority of his Christ have come, for the accuser of our brethren has been thrown down, who accuses them day and night before our God. And they have conquered him by the blood of the Lamb and by the word of their testimony, for they loved not their lives even unto death. Rejoice then, O heaven and you that dwell therein! But woe to you, O earth and sea, for the devil has come down to you in great wrath, because he knows that his time is short!" (RSV)

### *Michael and His Angels*

This text, initial appearances to the contrary notwithstanding, does have something to say to the matter at hand, ecumenism and spirituality. It does, because it has something to say to that common sin which jeopardizes both ecumenism and spirituality, the sin of worldliness, though I regret having to dignify the sin with such a wonderfully earthy, world-affirming term. It is the sin, let us say, of a spurious and demonic secularism, the sin of capitulating not just to the world but to the world's tyrannical captor, "that ancient serpent, who is called the Devil and Satan, the deceiver of the whole world." Not that the text makes a case for *other-worldliness*, as if that were even the opposite of worldliness. Neither, by the way, does the text require us to prove the existence of angels. That, if nothing else, would be a courtesy to the angels. Least of all do I want to plead for what Maritain in another connection brands as "angelism."<sup>2</sup> On the contrary, it is angelism precisely, that pseudo-spiritual abhorrence of things terrestrial, which I would argue Christian spirituality is not. And this text, for all its talk about angels and dragons and a war in heaven, for all of its "woe to you, O earth and sea," is mighty for just that argument. The spirituality which is most ecumenical is not a flight of the Alone to the Alone, or "what the individual does with his solitariness,"<sup>3</sup> if that implies a retreat from the world's battles. Rather it is from beginning to end, at least until the *Parousia*, a combat which resounds with the clash of arms, with "the sword of the Spirit," in the thick of the battle between Michael and his adversary. To that issue, which engages not only the Christian *oikumene* but the whole race and indeed the cosmos, this text does pertain, directly and vividly.

At first blush that may be a little hard to believe, for nothing could seem more irrelevant to our secular world today than this story about angels—unless, of course, we ourselves happened to *be* these angels. Which, as it turns out, we are. At least according to one durable exegetical tradition, (which includes such an anti-allegorizing exegete as Martin Luther) there is reason to suppose that the "angels" to whom Saint John here refers are not those celestial, disembodied spirits who are already gathered around the throne of grace but are rather those angels of God who are still on earth--in other words, you and I

---

<sup>2</sup> Jacques Maritain, *Three Reformers: Luther, Descartes, Rousseau* (London: Sheed and Ward, 1950), p. 54. This theme reappears in Maritain's philosophy of art. See his *Art and Scholasticism*, tr. by J. F. Scanlan (London: Sheed and Ward, 1930), pp. 23, 78, 91, 135. I, like many others, cannot silence the wish that Maritain would retract his chapter on Luther in *Three Reformers*, a chapter so conspicuously unworthy of its distinguished author, just as in *Art and Scholasticism* (p. 60) he did see fit to retract his earlier criticism of Stravinsky.

<sup>3</sup> Alfred North Whitehead, *Religion in the Making* (New York: Macmillan, 1926), p. 16.

and all our fellow Christians.<sup>4</sup> "Sanctos homines," Augustine calls them.<sup>5</sup> These angels of Michael are not those holy, shining ones who have remained steadfast since their creation but are rather those human ones who have fallen and have since had to be reclaimed through "the blood of the Lamb," those angels who do not yet behold the face of their Father in heaven but who know him only by faith and through "the word of their testimony," who are still stalked day and night by their satanic deceiver, "who accuses them day and night before our God." These are angels who do not yet enjoy uninterrupted peace and triumph but who must yet wage "war in heaven" --in that heaven which their Lord has called the "kingdom of heaven," which is not "lo here or lo there" but is among them.

Of course, the exegetes who identified the "angels" in Revelation 12 with the church in history had no wish to displace those *other* angels. The same Luther, when preaching not on the epistle but on the gospel lection for Michaelmas, makes no effort either to allegorize or to demythologize Matthew 18:10: "In heaven their angels always behold the face of their Father who is heaven."<sup>6</sup> Similarly, the same Maritain who inveighed against angelism could write his friend Cocteau, concerning "the angels that guard us, "that" my own philosophy was deeply concerned with them" and "it never tired of admiring the angelic natures."<sup>7</sup> On the other hand, his wife Raissa wrote a charming book about a very down-to-earth angel, Thomas Aquinas, *The Angel of the Schools*.<sup>8</sup> Likewise the seer of the Apocalypse, who certainly had nothing against celestial angels, (1:1,2) nevertheless recorded his vision for an altogether human "angel of the church in Ephesus" (2:1) and "the angel of the church in Smyrna." (2:8) He could quite as easily have addressed it to the angels of the church in Pittsburgh or Saint Louis. Let us say then, at least for the purposes of our discussion, that the angels of Michael are you and I and all the church, and our "war in heaven" is the spiritual combat of the church militant.

Then who is this leader of the angels who is called Michael? According to the same exegetical tradition, the name "Michael" in this case does not refer to the angel Michael in the Book of Daniel, unless it be that angel of whom Nebuchadnezzar exclaimed, his form is like that "of the Son of God" (Daniel 3:25). The word Michael, in other words, might well not be a personal, creaturely name at all, like Gabriel or Peter or Paul, but in this case should rather be taken literally as a christological pun: *Micha-el*, "Who is like God," *Quis sicut Deus*. And who is like God? Earlier in the Book of Revelation John had spoken of "one like a son of man," (1:13) who is "the first and the last and the living one" (1:17,18) and "who loves us and has freed us from our sins by his blood and made us a

---

<sup>4</sup> See Luther's Predigt am Michaelstag of 1544, *D. Martin Luthers Werke* (Weimar: Herman Bohlaus Nachfolger, 1913), vol. 49, p. 578.

<sup>5</sup> Or is it Pseudo-Augustine? See Homilia IX in *Sancti Aurelii Augustine, Opera Omnia*, in *Patrologiae Patrum Latinorum*, ed. by J. P. Migne (Paris, 1841), col. 2434.

<sup>6</sup> Op. cit., vol. 37, pp. 151-153.

<sup>7</sup> Jacques Maritain and Jean Cocteau, tr. by John Coleman, *Art and Faith* (New York: Philosophical Library, 1948), p. 12.

<sup>8</sup> "Saint Thomas, to tell the truth, was not invisible. He was even very tall, and very big. But like an angel he was pure strong and a messenger of divine light." Raissa Maritain, tr. by Julie Kernan, *St. Thomas Aquinas, The Angel of the Schools* (New York: Sheed and Ward, 1935), p. 12.

kingdom, priests to his God and Father" (1:5,6). Which one is it of all the angels who himself so partakes of the divine majesty that he alone can be said to be truly the Son of God? Of whom does the writer to the Hebrews say, "he reflects the glory of God and bears the very stamp of his nature, upholding the universe by his word of power" (1:13)? This is he, the same epistle says, "who by himself purged our sins." Of whom does the writer to the Colossians say, "he is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn of all creation"? It is he "in whom we have redemption, the forgiveness of sins" (1:15,14).

From the outset, at least as early as Justin Martyr, "angel" was used as a christological title, and the Canon of Hippolytus celebrated "Christ the angel of great counsel."<sup>9</sup> Later exegetes explicitly identified Christ with the Michael of Revelation 12.<sup>10</sup> In the Augustinian sermon referred to earlier, the preacher tells his hearers, "...Michaelem, Christum intellige."<sup>11</sup> And for Beatus, says Prigent, "Michael n'est autre que le Christ."<sup>12</sup> Likewise for the Venerable Bede, who acknowledges his debt to Tyconius.<sup>13</sup> Nicholas of Lyra, to whom Luther owed much, may have intended the same identification when he referred to Michael as "Hercules" and as the vicar of God.<sup>14</sup> So perhaps did John Purvey, the Wycliffite, for whose commentary on the Apocalypse Luther wrote a *Vorrede* in 1528.<sup>15</sup> Sixteen years later Luther was still preaching:

Der Furst aber dieses Kriegs, den er Michael heisset, der ist und kann kein ander sein weder unser Herr Jhesus Christus, Gottes Sohn.<sup>16</sup>

Long after Luther Christians continued to sing Nikolaus Hermann's "Heut' singt die liebe Christenheit," which in one of its variants retains the identification, "Michael, unser Herre Christ."<sup>17</sup> Recently Wilhelm Koepp reported a revival of interest in the Michael-Christ tradition.<sup>18</sup>

Even exegetes who may not make the identification of Michael with Christ explicit do explicitly identify Michael's victory with Christ's. New Testament scholar Heinrich Schlier, formerly Lutheran and now Roman Catholic, has contributed a monograph to the

<sup>9</sup> Phillip Carrington, *The Meaning of the Revelation* (New York: Macmillan, 1931), p. 223. Augustine writes, "No one should be astonished to hear Christ spoken of as 'the angel of the Lord of hosts.'" *The City of God*, tr. By G. G. Walsh and D. J. Honan (New York: Fathers of the Church, Inc., 1954), Bk. XVIII, ch. 35, p. 140.

<sup>10</sup> It can hardly be claimed, however, that this tradition achieved anything like unanimity. Speaking of Primasius, Pierre Prigent says, "La solide culture biblique de Primase lui interdit d'identifier Michael au Christ." *Apocalypse 12, Histoire de l'exegese*, vol. 2 in *Beitrage zur Geschichte der biblischen Exegese* (Tubingen: J. C. B. Mohr, 1959), p. 20.

<sup>11</sup> *Loc. cit.*

<sup>12</sup> Prigent, *op. cit.*, p. 16.

<sup>13</sup> *The Complete Works of Venerable Bede*, ed. By J. A. Giles (London: Whittaker, 1884), vol. XII, pp. 391-392.

<sup>14</sup> Prigent, *op. cit.*, p. 47.

<sup>15</sup> Luther, *op. cit.*, vol. 26, pp. 121-123.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*, vol. 49, p. 578.

<sup>17</sup> Wilhelm Stahlin, *Predighthilfen über die altkirchlichen Episteln*, (Kassel: Johannes Stauda Verlag, 1955), p. 142.

<sup>18</sup> "Christus die Engel und Sankt Michael," *Evangelisch-Lutherische Kirchenzeitung*, vol. VI, nos. 20 and 21 (October 31 and November 15, 1952), pp. 367-369, 382-384.

fine series, "Quaestiones Disputatae," which numbers Leonard Swidler among its contributors.<sup>19</sup> Entitled *Principalities and Powers in the New Testament*, Schlier's essay emphasizes repeatedly that the victory over Satan in Revelation 12, though it is "the victory of the heavenly powers," is one with "the victory of Christ"; that "the accuser and his accusation are thrust down from his place" because "the place before God's throne is taken by Jesus Christ who died and rose again"; and that the resultant hymn of triumph in Revelation 12 is "the effect of Christ's cross and resurrection."<sup>20</sup> In a series of lectures also entitled *Principalities and Powers* another exegete, G. B. Caird, notes that "in the main biblical tradition the fall of Satan from heaven coincides with the ministry of Jesus, and in particular with the Crucifixion."<sup>21</sup> By "the main biblical tradition" Caird means Revelation 12:10, but also Jesus' statements in Luke 10:18 ("I saw Satan fall like lightning from heaven") and in John 12:31 ("Now is the judgment of this world, now shall the ruler of this world be cast out.") It is Jesus then—at least let us say so for the problem at hand—who is the *Micha-el*, the *Quis sicut Deus*, whose angels we are. Christ and his church, Michael and all angels—a spiritual host whose ecumenical credentials ought to suffice. And Christians are unanimously ecumenical in confessing that only that Michael who is Christ is adequate to the spiritual warfare they confront.

### *The Church and the World Against the Common Enemy*

In fact, the war his angels wage is more than ecumenical. (And war, let us repeat, is of the essence of their spirituality, not world-fleeing neutrality or appeasement or aloofness, however religious.) The spiritual warfare of the angels of Michael, at least on its outermost front, finds them joining forces not only with one another in the church but with all humanity as well, trans-ecumenically, in common cause against that hideous strength: "the great dragon, . . . that old serpent called the Devil and Satan." For he is bent upon the devastation not only of the angels of Michael, "our brethren," but of "the earth," "the whole world." His incursions are not confined to matters religious or even moral. He is equally adept with the seemingly secular weapons of disease and death and ignorance and poverty and dirt and unemployment and blight and violence. Melanchthon, in his hymn for Michaelmas, says of the Devil

So now he subtly lies in wait  
To ruin school and church and state.<sup>22</sup>

Notice, not only church but school and state as well. Schlier writes:

He takes possession of all levels of natural everyday life, ... in the soul and body of the individual or in what we call natural phenomena, ... in the general spirit of the world, or in the spirit of a particular period, attitude, nation or locality.<sup>23</sup>

---

<sup>19</sup> Leonard Swidler (editor), *Dialogue for Reunion: The Catholic Premises* (New York: Herder and Herder, 1962).

<sup>20</sup> *Principalities and Powers in the new Testament* (New York: Herder and Herder, 1961), pp. 73, 64, 47, 49.

<sup>21</sup> *Principalities and Powers* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1956), p. 31.

<sup>22</sup> The Lutheran Hymnal (Saint Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1941), no. 254.

<sup>23</sup> Schlier, *op. cit.*, p. 31.

In this battle the National Science Foundation and the holy Christian church, the pastor in his pulpit and the college physics instructor, the believer at his prayers and the reporter on his beat, the confessor with his absolution and the mother with her caresses and cures and consolations, the Christian demonstrator with his placard and the agnostic demonstrator with his, the parochial-school teacher with the Bill of Rights and the public-school teacher with the Pledge of Allegiance, the church choir and the dancer and the clown, all are comrades in arms against a common foe. To wage war against this diabolic force is the responsibility not only of the church but of every social institution, of every man of good will, of all the arts and sciences and of every useful endeavor. But the church does have a responsibility here, too, however ambiguous and problematical that responsibility may become in her alliances with the world. The very locale of this seminar, a church-related university, is a parable in point. Here the church is engaged, of all things, in such apparently secular pursuits as the identifying of isotopes, the conjugation of French verbs, dating the Ming dynasty, brain-picking Freud and Darwin and Nietzsche. On this perimeter of the battle—which for the angels of Michael is no less spiritual, since here too it is in his name that they strive—their alliances are trans-ecumenical.

Not for a moment does this mean, however, that the uniquely spiritual resource which the church marshals against the adversary is obliterated. Not at all. That is evident already in her reconnaissance. She knows the enemy and, knowing him, she does not underestimate him. That is why she calls out to her unwitting comrades beyond the church, "woe to you, O earth and sea," not as self-congratulation but as the eschatological warning. She knows, even when the New Testament speaks of "spirit against the flesh," that the spiritual struggle is not finally against "flesh and blood" but against "principalities and powers, against the world rulers of this present darkness" (Eph. 6:12). "The deceiver of the whole world" is at his worst when he blinds the world to his very existence, and hence to the urgency of its own need.

To act, think or speak against this spirit is regarded as non-sensical or even as wrong and criminal. It is "in" this spirit that men encounter the world and affairs, which means that they accept the world as this spirit presents it to them, with all its ideas and values, in the form in which he wants them to find it.<sup>24</sup>

In the realm of letters Maritain observes a similar demonization, and issues his warning. "The unconcealed and palpable influence of the devil on an important part of contemporary literature is one of the significant phenomena of the history of our time."<sup>25</sup>

The biologist who labors to isolate and classify some deadly virus is reconnoitering, not only the enemy the virus, but also "that old serpent called the Devil," who knows even better than the biologist how to use viruses. Now of course no one here is advocating that the biologist relinquish the germ theory of disease and go chasing off after demons—which, no doubt, is exactly the way they would best elude him. What we are suggesting is that it would be better for the biologist, not for his biology perhaps but surely for his theology, if he recognized that his battle not only involves antibiotic versus virus but also involves the Lord of life against the dragon of death.

---

<sup>24</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 31-32.

<sup>25</sup> *Art and Scholasticism, op. cit.*, p. 108.

The agronomist who has forgotten the curse which was hurled at his ancestor in Eden, the curse of the thorns and the thistles, the geologist who is unmindful that the mountains can be invoked to fall on us and the hills to cover us, the psychiatrist who ignores the hidden truth about demonic possession, the psychologist who describes the phenomenon of learning and error without giving a thought to the "father of lies"—is in each case probably no worse off as a scientist. He may even be better off than his Christian colleague, because he is less distracted. And he is still, indeed, a useful ally against the forces of darkness. Nonetheless, he is a soldier who does not begin to know what he is up against, a soldier who might well win the battle but is doomed to lose the war.

We have come a long way in our secular culture since the days when our Nordic and Teutonic ancestors were tempted to see a demon or a troll or a sprite behind every bush, but our emancipation has cost us something, too. We have lost sight of the enemy, and that itself is a kind of bedevilment. The Robin Hood on our television screens today is still agile enough at tree-climbing and archery to delight our youngsters, but he no longer means either for us or for our youngsters what he once meant for the superstitious pagans of Old England, the struggle of the religious hero against the dark forces of the forest. If the factory workers of Derbyshire and Leek until recently have imagined that physical power needs not only machinery but incantations and gestures to domesticate it, we at least have long been too sophisticated to believe that. My contemporaries and I can no longer appreciate the attitude of a Luther who, when he made his journey to Rome, found the Alps (as others of his contemporaries did) a forbidding sight. We are more likely to see in them only what Rousseau did, enrapturing splendor and quietude for the soul.

As one physicist has noted, we have labored diligently and gratefully over the principle of evolution and have seen in it all sorts of optimistic implications for cosmic progress and human advance. Not nearly so diligently have we asked about the sobering implications of the principle of entropy, the irreversible tendency of physical events from order to disorder.<sup>26</sup> The very festival of Michaelmas for which this epistle lesson was appointed is traditionally celebrated in the fall of the year because that is the time when day and night are in equilibrium, as Michael and the Dragon are in deadlock, and when the autumnal storms which are beginning to rage on the high seas betoken the struggle between the angels of God and the angels of Satan. We today are more apt to schedule Michaelmas at this particular time, if we do at all, because that is when the church publisher has scheduled it on the liturgical calendar. We have effectively demythologized Robin Hood and our factory machinery and the Alps and the second law of thermodynamics and the Feast of St. Michael—and not without immense benefit, let us admit it. However, there is the danger that the devils thus exorcised may have returned through the back door, more sanitary perhaps but seven times stronger than at first.

---

<sup>26</sup> C. F. von Weizsäcker, tr. by Marjorie Grene, *The World View of Physics* (Chicago; The University of Chicago Press, 1952), pp. 167-171. For an alternative view of the matter, see Stephen Toulmin, "Contemporary Scientific Mythology," in *Metaphysical Beliefs*, ed. By Alasdair MacIntyre and R. G. Smith (London: SCM press, 1957).

The blame for this new secular variety of bedevilment, to which we are so vulnerable because we are so unaware, does not lie with the secularist alone. Frequently his most cooperative accomplice is the church. She, too, is implicated in this fallacy, and not only when she is inclined to be too secular. Sometimes in diametric reaction to "the world" she abandons the battle and cowers within the sanctuaries of a false spirituality, too repelled by the raucous and uncouth clamor even to call out her "woes." What better way to surrender the field to the enemy? Pierre Pourrat, despite his unfortunate mispresentation of the Reformation, might well be correct in this observation:

It was indeed . . . the desire to keep the spiritual life free from the pagan spirit of the Renaissance that resulted in the development of methodical prayer. As the Christian found himself surrounded with nothing but enticements to evil, he had to fall back upon himself and encircle himself with the rampart of a method of prayer. He thus made a sort of inner sanctuary, closed to all unwholesome influences, and in it his supernatural convictions were guarded and fortified.<sup>27</sup>

However, if ourrat means to construe this development in Christian spirituality as a blessing, even a mixed blessing, there is much too much historical evidence of churchly retreat and much too little of spiritual aggressiveness to warrant his optimism.

Let it be remembered that this retreat of the churches was not confined to one or two sectors of Christendom. What Pourrat reports about Roman Catholic spirituality had its parallels elsewhere. The noted Calvinist preacher at Charenton, Charles Drelincourt, reminded his seventeenth century hearers what it should mean for them to be "strangers" in the world. "The Strangers are not very fond of the land in which they are ill-used, and they speak of it only with scorn."<sup>28</sup> "Thus it comes about," remarks Albert-Marie Schmidt, "that Calvin's disciples actually break the explicit instructions of their masters and find pleasure in the doubtful luxury of a kind of religious segregation which has at times been wrongly encouraged by their ministers."<sup>29</sup>

As for the Lutherans, Werner Elert reports, "even those who could have had better knowledge made use of Luther's designation of the world as a 'vale of tears' in order to ascribe to Lutheranism an altogether quietistic-pessimistic conception of life."

Amid the joyful dawning of the Reformation one senses it in the sermons of Bugenhagen and later in the Latin sermons of Melanchthon or in the sermons Andrea preached against the Turks. Lukas Osiander opposed the calendar reform because, as he thought, the Last Day was near. . . . Tycho Brahe found that the new star that appeared on November 11, 1572, "had been shown to the world that was approaching its evening." And when the announcement was made at the Reformation jubilee in 1717 that the Saxon electoral prince had gone over to the

---

<sup>27</sup> *Christian Spirituality*, tr. By W. H. Mitchell (Westminster, Maryland: The Newman Press, 1953), vol. III, p. vi.

<sup>28</sup> Quoted in Albert-Marie Schmidt, tr. By Robert Wallace, *Calvin and the Calvinist Tradition* (New York: Harper, 1960), p. 167.

<sup>29</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 166.

Roman Church, the pastor at Leubnitz wrote to Loscher: "Evening is approaching; now, Christ, it shall remain ours."

"Of course," Elert adds, "the thought that the end of the world is imminent is common to ... the Gospel. But the mood of doom of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries is ... brought about by inner-worldly details: the menacing comet, the danger from the Turks, or, as Melanchthon puts it, the 'catastrophes' of the Roman Empire."<sup>30</sup> For that matter who of us cannot sympathize with these fathers in the faith? Nor is it for us to poke the accusing finger at them. But there is such a thing as being warned by their experience and remembering, in fear and trembling, that if these things be done in a green tree what could be done in a dry one?

The alternative is to wile on the world. Far too often a false spirituality, retrenched and gun-shy, has abandoned the church's secularist allies, who then have to go it alone, unmindful of the real odds and the real adversary. It was not only to the Dominicans but to all the angels of Michael that Camus made his conscience-searing plea. "Perhaps we cannot prevent this world from being a world in which children are tortured. But we can reduce the number of tortured children. And if you don't help us, who else in the world can . . . ?"

... A great unequal battle has begun. . . . But I believe it must be fought, and I know that certain men at least have resolved to do so. I merely feel that they will occasionally feel somewhat alone, that they are in fact alone. . . . And what I know ... is that if Christians made up their minds to it, millions of voices—millions, I say—throughout the world would be added to the appeal of a handful of isolated individuals. . . .<sup>31</sup>

While saints are at their prayers burly sinners have to run the world.

In this perimeter of the battle where church and non-church are united against the same enemy, the very least to be expected is that there will be cooperation between Christian and Christian, church and church, regardless of their confessional differences. This concern with the problem of the modern world," writes Robert McAfee Brown, "provides the area in which Roman Catholics and non-Roman Catholics can most immediately begin to make common cause together."

Catholics and Protestants can sit around a mayor's table together and urge revision of discriminatory housing statutes, even though they cannot yet sit around the Lord's Table, eating one bread and drinking from one cup. Catholics and Protestants can agree about the dogma that every man, regardless of the color of his skin, is made in God's image, even though they cannot yet agree about the dogma of the Assumption of the Virgin Mary.<sup>32</sup>

---

<sup>30</sup> *The Structure of Lutheranism*, tr. by Walter A. Hansen (Saint Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1962), vol. I, pp. 464-465.

<sup>31</sup> Albert Camus, tr. By Justin O'Brien, *Resistance, Rebellion, and Death* (New York: The Modern Library, 1960), pp. 55-56.

<sup>32</sup> "Protestant Hopes for the Vatican Council," *Look*, vol. 28, no. 20 (October 6, 1964), p. 23.

The truth is that this minimal "common cause" is trans-ecumenical, engaging not only "Catholics and Protestants" but all men, extending as it does far beyond the battle lines of the Christian church. There are numberless opportune ways in which the angels of Michael share the cause also with the non-Christian and the worldling and "the unspiritual man," and it is no tribute to our spirituality, and no advantage to the battle of Michael, if we deprecate the divine boon of the secularist ally and the chance to aid and succor him—not least with the warning to him, "woe to you, O earth and sea, for the devil has come down to you in great wrath, because he knows that his time is short." It is right and proper, therefore, that John XXIII's *Pacem in Terris* should invite cooperation with "all men of good will," "also with human beings who are not enlightened by faith in Jesus Christ, but who are endowed with the light of reason and with a natural and operative honesty."<sup>33</sup>

### *The Spirituality of Accusation*

However, there is still that one most lethal form of satanic harassment which the church, and the church uniquely, is called to cope with. The seer of the Apocalypse refers to this when he calls the Devil "the accuser" who day and night accuses the brethren before God. It is by his accusations more than by anything else that Satan succeeds, as the seer says, in deceiving the whole world. Of what does he accuse the brethren? He accuses them of sin—for instance, the sin of inter-denominational lovelessness. But what is so satanic about that accusation? They really are sinful, really loveless and distant, aren't they? Indeed they are, grievously so. The trouble is, the adversary does his accusing not by innuendo or by private revelations but by the facts, by the public and palpable circumstances of history. For example, the churches' lovelessness stands accused by something so real as their existing institutional divisions. Yes, but doesn't that incriminating evidence simply confirm the Devil's accusations more than ever? True, yet his accusations, especially since they have the ring of hard fact, deceive men into believing it is God who is accusing them, as though their lovelessness angers God, as though their strife and their rifts are a divine judgment upon them. Ah, but their rifts are a divine judgment, and a wrathful one, too. There is plenty of biblical warrant for that.

If that is so, then ponder the consequences for our spirituality. If the Devil's accusations embody the judgment of the holy God, then the manly thing to do, it would seem, is not to complain about how satanic and deceitful these accusations are but rather to take them seriously as godly and truthful and to make maximum spiritual use of them, however much the painful truth may hurt. Doesn't it follow, in other words, that this accusatory self-criticism not only is needed but is in truth the answer, the divine answer, to our need? Isn't this exactly the kind of spirituality which good ecumenists should urge: to face up to the grim facts of our brokenness, and not only to face up to these facts but to drive them home, each one of us out-confessing the other; to make no premature boasts about our

---

<sup>33</sup> The complete text of the encyclical, in official English translation, appeared in *Saint Louis Review*, special supplement April 19, 1963. See p. 7.

unity, except perhaps that of the "invisible church," and never to glory in our inter-confessional gains lest we grow complacent and self-deceived; to let the deserved accusations do their penitential work, reducing our self-sufficiency to an honest acceptance of our finitude and need; until finally, the last veil of self-deception fallen, we are united—as sinners, if nothing else?

Is that finally the answer? No, not finally, at least not God's. Satan's final answer, yes, but not Michael's. Yet Satan's answer, just because his accusations are vastly and factually true and humanly impossible to refute and in line with the very judgment of God, seduces the most spiritual and the most ecumenical of men, the "saintly" ones as well as the "practical" ones, the "angelists" as well as the "anglers" to recall that outrageous pun of Gregory I (who was "the Great" obviously in spite of his pun) about the angelic Angles. Both types of spirituality are prone to satanism—literally, to accusationism. The ecclesiastical pragmatists, on the one hand, who work all the angles, those problem-solvers and trouble-shooters who sometimes qualify euphemistically as "churchmen"—as distinguished, presumably, from plain church members—exercise a spirituality which for all its activism is basically negative. It proceeds at the outset from what is *wrong* with the church. That is, it proceeds from an accusation. To proceed instead from what is right with the church and from that glorious success and unity she already enjoys is, from the nervous viewpoint of the anglers, the fatal road to complacency and stagnation. Their spirituality affirms the way of accusation with a frenetic and elaborately programmed, but sadly mistaken, Yes.

Still, if the answer to the Accuser is not Yes, neither is it No. To say, Man does *not* live by accusation, is true but it is not the answer. For that, too, is but one more accusation, an accusation of our accusatoriness. That is like trying to be positive by saying, "We ought not be so negative." But that double negative does characterize the spirituality of the saintly "angelists," who are sick the endless criticisms and reforms and diagnoses, who are impatient with the impatience of the ecumenists and who respond with generous wrath to any mention of the wrath of God and who find nothing so sinful as the doctrine of original sin. They flee instead for their spirituality to a negation of the negatives, resembling in this superficial respect the *via negativa* of those old mystics who sought the One through reducing all consciousness of the worldly Many to a psychic "Null." The assumption evidently is that two No's make a Yes also in matters spiritual—that is, that two deaths make a life. When pressed to divulge just where the Yes is to be found—where that church is, for example, which by their own confession is one, holy, catholic and apostolic—the angelists point off and away to some "invisible church," "dreaming about some Platonic republic" as Melanchthon says,<sup>34</sup> or they point to a oneness among Christians which so far prevails only in the divine love or only "in Christ," the implication being that none of this transcendent unity is yet to be seen and heard in the facts of churchly existence, down here where the negating is being done and where it needs to be undone.

---

<sup>34</sup> "Apology of the Augsburg Confession," in T. G. Tappert (tr. and ed.). *The Book of Concord* (Philadelphia: Muhlenberg Press, 1959), p. 171.

However, if the answer to the Accuser is neither Yes nor No, and surely it is not some little bit of both, then that appears to exhaust every alternative. Yet that very appearance is the great satanic deception, namely, that there is no other way than the way of self-criticism or the way of the criticism of self-criticism, at least no other way which is godly and spiritual and ecumenical. But that assumption is, to call it by its biblical name, a lie. Nevertheless, to say even that, true as it may be, is only another denunciation. Where is there an authentic, all-displacing Yes? Where on earth—yes, on earth—is that church which is one, holy, catholic and apostolic? Where is there an already flourishing spirituality which defeats the Accuser, not by trying to outdo his accusations nor by surrendering the earth to him, not even by declaring war against him, but by declaring victory over him? Wherever that is, then there, we can be sure, is the real spirituality for ecumenism.

Before we proceed to that resolution, however, the reminder is in order that the accusations of Satan, including his exposures of our unchurchliness, reflect at the same time the effectual judgment of God. There is nothing so pathetically naive as the church which forgets on whose authority the accusations ultimately come and which supposes that the accusations can be dispelled if the brethren would only stop believing them and would please be a little more positive. 'As though the accusations originated in the heads of the brethren. 'As though the hard fact that you are Presbyterians and you are Roman Catholics and I am a Lutheran, that your children had best not inter-marry with mine, that your Roman bishops are deprived of the admonitions of your Reformed presbyteries, that we mean contrary things when we confess the same words, that you may not commune at my altar, that your fonts are not for our infants or my alms for your needy or your prayers for our missionaries—as though these hard facts of life and death needed nothing more to eradicate them than you and I, or even you and I and all other Christians, should decide to do so. 'As though these facts had nothing at all to do with the very judgment of God. 'As though nothing more were needed to reverse his judgment than that we should decide to do so.

Already in the ancient story of Balaam, Caird reminds us, "the function of the *satan* is to oppose the wrong-doer, and it is a divine function."<sup>35</sup> Also "throughout the New Testament period Satan retains his juridical duties.... As long as there are sinners to be arraigned before the judgment seat of God, there is work for Satan in heaven."<sup>36</sup> "In heaven," of course, does not imply that his accusations are removed from the factuality of our common existence, where we do in fact make decisions and where our decisions do make some difference in fact. "The 'heavens'... surround and touch upon the material world . . .," says Schlier. "By the heavens we mean the supreme form of material life; it is the Unseen which we nevertheless perceive, ... by which [man] is menaced, seduced and determined."<sup>37</sup> Nevertheless, though the accusations of Satan are played out within the immanent circumstances of our history, where we act as well as are acted upon, it is first of all "before our *God*" says the seer, that the accusations are conducted. Hence, if ecumenism is not to be ruined by a spirituality of negation, if the way of accusation is to

---

<sup>35</sup> Caird, *op. cit.*, p. 17.

<sup>36</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 33/

<sup>37</sup> Schlier, *op. cit.*, p. 17.

be overcome, then it must be overcome "in heaven," "before our God," as well as in the decisions and acts of our churchly life.

Alas, even to say "the way of accusation *must* be overcome" only re-enforces a prior accusation, namely, that as yet it has *not* been overcome. Our most pious imperatives only barely conceal the satanic (though divine) negatives which they presuppose, and in effect these imperatives reinstate the round of accusation more firmly than before. What a snare is the adversary's web! Every exertion against it only constricts it the more. The tightening circle may begin, for instance, with a well-meaning lament over our churches' dividedness. But then, pricked by the reminder of what fellowship we do enjoy, we apologize for our ingratitude. That is, we criticize our criticalness. But to that second round of criticism, just by my exposing it, I have now added a third criticism. And there in turn, by exposing myself, I have compounded the third with a fourth, and now that one with still another, *ad infinitum*. This is not the sophistry, the game of words, which at first it seems to be. Unfortunately not. (But even if it were, that would only be meeting the problem with still another criticism.) Nor can the deadly circle be eluded simply by translating our spirituality from negative sentences into affirmatives, as though it were all but a matter of syntax. Even such a positive, smiling announcement as "We in the ecumenical movement have so much to be thankful for" still implies the accusation, "Yes, and that only reveals how very thankful we ought to be but are not." To dispose of the accusation altogether we would have to be able to announce, "We in the ecumenical movement are every bit as thankful as we ought to be." But that rash claim, in face of all withering accusations to the contrary, we dare not make. Understandably not.

The vicious circle, far from being merely a secular accident of language or a psychological case of excessive scrupulosity, is as cosmic as that demonic ring of evil which the witches of old supposed could be broken only by exceptionally superior and secret powers. Biblically, as in the second chapter of Romans, this vortex of accusation upon accusation, criticism upon criticism-- Paul uses the same word, *krima*--is the inescapably immanent way in which the righteous God causes sinners to implicate themselves in the divine judgment precisely by their invoking it. And the more conscientious and dis-*crimi*-nating and judgmental they are, the more in-*crimi*-nated they are. "O man, whoever you are, when you judge another, ... in passing judgment upon him you condemn yourself." (2:1) That being so, the solution would then seem to be (also in the churches' ecumenical practice) to stop passing judgment upon "another" and to start judging themselves. Still, that is only a subtler form of the same judgment, perhaps just a more advanced stage of the critical spiral. Like those "who have not the law," their very *self*-criticisms

show that what the law requires is written on their hearts, while their conscience also bears witness and their conflicting thoughts accuse or perhaps excuse them...

Their accusing themselves--indeed, even their excusing themselves--only confirms the unbroken *krima* of God himself, as "God judges the secrets of men . . ." (2:14-16). Thus, whether they criticize others or criticize themselves or criticize their criticism of others or their criticism of themselves, they themselves perpetuate (as I am doing this very moment) the whole deadly order of the law, the satanic spirituality of accusation.

### *The Circle Is Broken by the Blood of the Lamb*

How is the fatal circle broken? "By the blood of the Lamb," the seer of the Apocalypse exults, thereby divulging the vital secret, the *mysterion*. Our ecumenism is as spiritual—that is, as triumphant over the adversary—and our spirituality is as ecumenical—that is, as cosmic in its victory—as both our ecumenism and our spirituality enjoy "the blood of the Lamb." Enjoy, indeed. The cross and the blood and the hill called The Skull and the Agnus Dei, though they sound for all the world like No, (and may sound that way also to the angelists and the anglers) are the one jubilant Yes of the angels of Michael everywhere. For the satanic law of accusation, in fact God's own law, which "increases trespass" and "brines wrath" and "kills," God himself has undergone, "made of a woman, made under the law," "made a curse for us," "made to be sin for us," bearing "our sin in his body on the tree," "condemning sin in the flesh." Submitting to the deadly circle of the divine *krima*, he suffered it out of existence, burst it asunder, new wine for old wineskins, the yeast of joy for the bread of sorrows, grace for law, forgiveness for accusation, new covenant for old—all of it "in my blood."

This theme of "the blood of the Lamb", perhaps more pervasively and ecumenically than any other, informs the spirituality of Christian churches everywhere: in Bach's *Saint Matthew Passion* and the Salvation Army's "Are you Washed in the Blood of the Lamb," in a pastor's signing his flock with the cross or in a young girl's necklace with a cross as her yoke, in a massive, abstract crucifix or in a humble peasant's icon in "dying with Christ" in baptism whether in a Tennessee River or in a cathedral baptistry, in the burial liturgies for those who are "laid to rest in the Lord," in the Nicene Creed's "he suffered and was buried" and in every collect's "for Jesus' sake," and especially in the Holy Communion of his body and blood.

As the church's spirituality equally attests, "the blood of the Lamb," for all its abject humiliation, is not for that reason any less a victory. Good Friday is of a piece with Easter, not a prologue to it, not some traumatic episode which on Easter Sunday the church hastens to forget as though our Lord's death were the opposite of his resurrection. Rather, in the wondrous dialectic of the Easter Preface, the church speaks of him "who by his death hath destroyed death and by his rising again hath restored to us everlasting life"—giving praise "for the glorious resurrection" of whom? "The very Paschal Lamb which was offered for us." In the gospel for the first Sunday after Easter the risen Lord who appears to doubting Thomas still bears the nail-prints and the scar (John 20:25-38), a sign if ever there was that the victory had gone his way: the way of the good shepherd who lays down his life for the sheep (John 10:11). At mass on the third Sunday after Easter the Alleluia Verse celebrates the same mysterious connection: "It behooved Christ to suffer these things and so to enter his glory, alleluia." Even on Pentecost, when the congregation sings full-throat Rhabanus Maurus' ninth century "Veni Creator Spiritus," unable to contain the exultation of the doxological stanza without springing to their feet, young and old alike, they still sing, "The Savior Son be glorified, who for lost men's redemption died." At the throne where Isaiah had only seen "the Lord . . . high and lifted up," (6:1) the seer of the Apocalypse saw with better vision "a Lamb," who receives the

"new song": ". . . thou wast slain and by thy blood didst ransom men for God" (5:6,9). This song of the blood of the Lamb the church still echoes, and always on a note of triumph, in her *Dignus est Agnus*.

### *Through the Cross Comes the Forgiveness of Sins*

"The blood of the Lamb"—for all its apparent irrelevance to those ecumenical programmers who are wont to say of it, "Yes, but now to get practical . . ."—is the very thing which marks the spirituality of the angels of Michael as "power" and "authority." What the "loud voice in heaven" announced to the seer was that "the power . . . of our God and the authority of his Christ have come." It is this advent of "the authority of his Christ," an advent already accomplished, for which the "practical" anglers still pathetically wait, as for Godot, and for which they still negotiate. Like the scribes in the ninth chapter of Matthew they need to hear that "the Son of Man has authority upon earth. . . ."

Perhaps their discontent is with the *function* of his authority, "to forgive sins," (Mt. 9:6) as though that were still something less than victory over the adversary. Yet that is the very point at which the Accuser has been vanquished, namely, at that point where the paralytic is told, "Take heart, my son, your sins are forgiven" (9:2). To say also, "Rise, take up your bed and go home," is not some second, different species of authority. It is but an extension of the one "authority upon earth to forgive sins" (9:6). To conquer viruses and segregation and poverty and ignorance, as we insisted earlier, is surely the winning of crucial battles. But to do so without defeating the ultimate adversary, the Accuser, by means of the ultimate weapon, "the blood of the Lamb"—to heal the paralytic without forgiving his sin—is to win the battle and yet lose the war. Similarly, the authority which alone heals the paralysis and wounds in the church is not our negotiated mergers, not even the one which result from ardent prayer and doctrinal agreements and unanimous votes, (indispensable as these are) but rather that authority which frees the churches from every accusation, including the accusation of their dividedness: "the authority of the Son of Man upon earth to forgive sins."

Yet isn't it just that, namely that clearing the churches of accusation, which ecumenical anglers dread as ruinous permissiveness lulling churches into ecumenical drones? That is a risk, let us admit it, especially where the prior accusations of the adversary are mistaken for merely human self-criticism, for something less fearful than the judgment of God. But there is a greater risk. By pretending that Christ does not already and in fact unite the churches in exonerating them of their divisions, we leave the churches with nothing but that penultimate authority: divine "criticism"—which word also means, originally, to separate. The really ecumenical spirituality is the one which, on good "authority," sings out in the midst of its empirical divisions, "Who shall lay any charge against God's elect, . . . who shall separate us from the love of Christ" (Rom. 8:33,35)? Recall the words of the absolution, not in their still somewhat tentative and guarded form as at prime or lauds or compline, May the almighty and merciful Lord grant us pardon," etc., but in a bold and declaratory formula like this one:

Upon this your confession I, by virtue of my office as a called and ordained servant of the Word, announce the grace of God unto all of you, and in the stead and by the command of my Lord Jesus Christ I forgive you all your sins in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Ghost.<sup>38</sup>

It is not impractical wishfulness, surely, but "the authority of his Christ" which in that superbly ecumenical act of spirituality, the *Apostolicum*, conjoins "the holy catholic church, the communion of saints" immediately with "the forgiveness of sin."

On the other hand, perhaps what they object to who underestimate the forgiveness of sin is not only that it is impractical and powerless but also that it is an easy way out. Easy, indeed. "Which is easier," Jesus asks the scribes, to forgive the paralytic or to heal him (Mt. 9:5)? We dare not miss the devastating irony in his question. "Easy," indeed. If only the scribes and all those law-oriented anglers who assume divine forgiveness is self-evident and, finding *such* forgiveness too easy need to implement it with "accusation" and cajolery—if they only knew how "easy" it really was to get the paralytic's sin forgiven. It was as "easy" as the cross. It was, as Matthew had just explained, (Mt. 8:17) that "easy" way of Isaiah's suffering servant, the *ebed yahweh* who removes "our iniquities . . . and our diseases" by "bearing" them and "taking" them as his own, not simply by revealing a forgiveness which would have prevailed anyway whether Jesus had borne the sin or not.

"There is no forgiveness of sins," says the Epistle to the Hebrews, "without the shedding of blood" (9:22). Whether Hebrews qualifies as canonical or not, the "blood" which refutes the easiness of Christ's forgiveness looms large enough right within the gospel of Matthew. As the passion history moves to its climax, we are brought to the supper in the upper room where Jesus makes unmistakably clear to his disciples by what "easy" way he secures their forgiveness: ". . . for this is my blood of the covenant, which is poured out for many for the forgiveness of sins" (26:28). Unfortunately there are those poor, bloodless traditions within the churches' spirituality whose eucharistic practice (if any) shrinks from the realism of our Lord's body and blood in the sacrament. What is unecumenical about that is not that it is a minority view (it may not be) but rather that it implies a forgiveness of sin which is available, easily enough, without "the blood of the Lamb." 'As though divine forgiveness were some timeless truth which would obtain anyway, with or without Jesus Christ, and which needs him at all not to bring the forgiveness about but only to bring it to light. In that case his absolving the paralytic really would have been as easy (and as ineffectual?) as his words, "take heart." 'As though this forgiveness did not need massive authorization, the *exousia* of the cross, in order to displace a whole cosmic order to the contrary, an order of accusation and divine judgment.

What is unspiritual finally about such christologies and their attendant eucharists, which so barely need the cross at all, is their reactionary regression to the way of the adversary, to a spirituality of accusationism rather than hard-won victory. The Lord's Supper, of course, is more than absolution, (it is also communion and eucharist and sacrifice) and

---

<sup>38</sup> *The Lutheran Hymnal, op. cit.*, p. 16.

there is also absolution without the Lord's Supper. But in this sacrament of bread and wine together with our Lord's *verba* concerning his body and blood—perhaps the earliest quotation we have from him (I Cor. 11:23-25)—the spirituality of the Christian *oikumene* best dramatizes the oneness of forgiveness and the cross. That this forgiveness was not easy to come by is directly related to its authority, as "the authority of his Christ" is related to "the blood of the Lamb."

Now it may be that we have still not met the real point of the angler's objection. Perhaps what he objects to is that forgiveness of sin is an easy way out, not for Christ admittedly, who by the critic's own Christian confession did indeed bear the cross, but for *Christians*, who presumably bear none of that cross and who ought not be coddled with cheap grace. This argument has considerable warrant, both sad and glad. 'Glad, because the church joyfully admits that the burden she has inherited from her Lord is, as he promised, "light" and his yoke "easy" (Mt. 11:30). Her yoke is easy because it is his before it is hers, and the church's spirituality abounds in reminders to this effect, particularly in her ministrations to the afflicted and the dying, and always and only to the penitent. What is sad, on the other hand, is not only that the forgiveness of sin seems to offer an easy way out but also, just because it does, it is for the man of conscience not the easiest but the very hardest thing on earth to accept. Witness the angler himself, *unable* to accept such an "easy" way out as forgiveness. His protest refutes itself. Easy, indeed. When was it, according to the words of consecration in the sacrament, that Jesus instituted the Lord's Supper? "The night when he was betrayed" (I Cor. 11:23). Betrayed by whom? Not only by Judas. After Judas had left the supper, the loyal disciples who stayed on that evening to receive the Lord's "blood of the covenant . . . poured out for . . . the forgiveness of sins" found the staying less and less easy. When time came for the outpouring, "then all the disciples forsook him and fled" (Mt. 26:56). Forgiveness is always cruciform, and it is this recurrent apostasy from it, not the acceptance of it, which every disciple finds alarmingly easy.

It is not to alarm him, however, but precisely to make forgiveness *easy* for him who is alarmed that the church mobilizes the full might of her spirituality: accusing and warning him, yes, but always again and again restoring him by that very power, ironically, from which he had apostatized, the easy yoke of forgiveness. Under that easy yoke all his other yokes of conscience—the needs and demands of his fellows, his afflictions and spiritual struggles, even the divine accusations—become light as well. They become light not in the sense that he ceases to feel their pressure, (he is not that kind of angel) but in the sense that he exploits their pressure to new purpose, bringing them into captivity under Christ, to serve the cause of forgiveness. These heavy, conscientious yokes become for him "the dear holy cross," as Luther called them—"holy," I suppose, because under their weight Christ's forgiveness is increasingly easy to want and enjoy, "dear" because the very accusations remind him of their opposite, the forgiveness of the Christ of the cross.

To sustain the *militia Christi* in this astute and supple spirituality the church's most staple supply-line no doubt is preaching, thus taking a cue from the apostles. Still, it is not only by the preacher that the Christian is fortified. He is surrounded and supported by the whole congregation, particularly at worship. The sin which burdens him they join in

confessing. His petitions are gathered up, "collected," and are prayed in the common collect. If his own confession of faith is weak, it comes out strong in the one credal voice of the congregation. His singing improves as it is lost in theirs. It has been said of Lutheranism (and perhaps of other communions) that during the long famine of Rationalism, when the preaching was almost as arid as the theology, the people sustained one another with the hymnal and the liturgy. In every age of the church this purpose remains: What previously had been not only difficult but humanly impossible, namely to thrive on forgiveness and to venture boldly in its liberation, is exactly what the church wills to make easy for all who are "weary and heavy-laden," rallying to them with the whole range of her spirituality.

### *The Unity of the Church*

It has not escaped your notice, I am sure, that repeatedly we have been employing such locutions as "the church does this" or "the church does that." That is more than a manner of speaking. The bold thing about such an expression is not only that it assumes the church is singular—perhaps most Christians assume that, including the angelists with their "invisible" church—but also that it assumes the one church is actually *doing* this or that, already and upon earth. It is this assumption—better, this faith—which the angelist finds difficult to manage. (As we turn our attention now from the angler to the angelist, still apologizing for the poor pun, perhaps these two designations ought to be cleared of any misunderstandings they may have accumulated here: these "dear enemies," as Maritain might call them, are only ideal types, not photographic reproductions of actual Christians; moreover, they are not so much opposites as they are converse sides of the same piety of accusationism; finally, they are probably not "they" at all but "we," the common temptation of every Christian.) What the angelist prefers to discount is that there is in fact a flourishing ecumenical spirituality, here and now, the agent of which is not so much the churches as the church, and not only Christ the head of the church but with him his body.

The locale for the authority of the Son of Man to forgive sin is, as he said, "upon earth" (Mt. 9:6). But what is more, the same authority upon earth which is his he shares upon earth with his disciples. It is no accident that, when Matthew concludes this healing story with a report on the crowd's reaction, he writes that "they glorified God, who had given such authority [not only to this man but] to *men*" (Mt. 9:8). Later on Jesus explains to these "men" how literally his authority is now theirs: "Truly, I say to you, whatever you bind on earth shall be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth shall be loosed in heaven" (Mt. 18:18). Similarly, in our Michaelmas text, the accuser not only is displaced from the "place" where Michael and his angels happen to be but is displaced by the very act of Michael "*and his angels*." Of this text (12:10) Schlier explains:

This implies that ... the principalities can always be driven from the place which Jesus Christ occupies on this earth as well, from the "body of Christ," which is the Church.

To this we should add: the principalities are driven out not only *from* the church but, because she is that body whose head is Christ, also *by* the church. Of "our brethren" the seer writes: "*They* have conquered him by the blood of the Lamb and by the word of *their* testimony. . . ."

Their conquest, of course, is always "by the blood of the Lamb," but by invoking that Lamb in "the word of their testimony," it is "they," "our brethren," the church, to whom Christ's conquest is likewise ascribed. Really, to say the one is to say the other. If the forgiveness of sin accrues at the outset from something so firmly "upon earth" as the Son of Man's bearing sinners' sin and bleeding human blood, it is but an extension of that same wonder when he authorizes these sinners to perform his forgiveness with him. The reason it is hard to believe "the holy, catholic church, the communion of saints" (especially when the translation reads "the communicating of holy things") is fundamentally the same reason it is hard to believe "who for us men and for our salvation . . . suffered and was buried." And the church's spirituality deals with the one problem as with the other, by renewing the very assurances of gospel which are so incredible. When canon 82 of the Trullan Council (692) forbade the representation of Christ under the form of a lamb, (contrary to liturgical tradition and of course to biblical precedent) Sergius I, a Syrian, provided—in practical protest, some say—for the special singing of the *Agnus Dei*. By the eleventh century the church was singing, as she still is today, her "O Christ, thou Lamb of God" in threesomes.<sup>39</sup> How low the divine mercy stoops, whether in the lowly Lamb himself or in the authority to forgive which he shares with his lowlier brothers, needs constant reminder in the church's spirituality. A formula for private absolution at the time of the Reformation has the pastor asking, "Do you believe that the forgiveness I declare is the forgiveness of God?" The penitent answers, "Yes, I do," and the absolution which follows both confirms his faith and confers what he believes: "Be it done for you as you have believed; according to the command of our Lord Jesus Christ, I forgive you your sins in the name of the Father," etc.<sup>40</sup> In this boldly realistic sense the word and sacraments of the church are, as the fathers called them, the very "means of grace."

That may well be: Our singing the *Agnus Dei* is itself the means by which the Lamb does "have mercy upon us," and it is nothing less than God's absolution which the penitent hears from his fellow-Christian. But we have still not made good on our promise: to identify an actual spirituality which is the doing, not only of this Christian or that Christian or of this church or that church, or the doing of Christ alone, but of his church as a whole, acting as one and upon earth. What if Sergius did sing the *Agnus Dei*, or even Sergius and a thousand Syrian Christians besides? That does not yet include the Christians at the Trullan Council, or for that matter the Presbyterians from Pittsburgh, not to mention "the whole church in earth and heaven." What if some Reformation pastors did forgive sin in the triune name? That is not all the pastors of the Reformation much less a concensus of all the laymen, not only not in Rome and Byzantium but not even in Geneva and Wittenberg. Their pastoral practice had neither your approval nor mine nor the apostles'. All of us might have approved of course, but none of us were consulted.

---

<sup>39</sup> Cross, *op. cit.*, p. 26.

<sup>40</sup> Tappert, *op. cit.*, p. 351.

Then how could the absolution of some obscure *Pfarrer* in Saxony or the *Kyrie* in some eleventh century convent or the evangelical sermon of a Scottish missionary in India or the Christian committal at a graveside in Hiroshima or a cup of water "in Jesus' name" in only-God-knows-where—how could any one of these actions realistically and with even minimal sense be said to be the action of the one, holy, catholic, and apostolic church? One thing is sure: if that could be said, then the one church could hardly be "invisible"; these very actions would render her visible and audible and palpable. Of course, that these actions not only could be but are the work of the triune God, at the same time that they are the work of this or that Christian, should not surprise anyone who knows how immanently that God works in Incarnation and Atonement and means of grace. But at the moment we are claiming something more, namely that these are the actions as well of the church of Christ one and entire, of Michael and all his angels, as ecumenical as any spirituality could be.

It is just this claim, however, which the seer of the Apocalypse presupposes when he says of those victorious martyrs, who "loved not their lives even unto death," that they are "our brethren." The fact that "*they* have conquered [the accuser] by the blood of the Lamb and by the word of *their* testimony" gives cause to "rejoice," not only to them but to all "heaven and you that dwell therein." When they conquered, so did the whole church. In "the word of their testimony" they witnessed for the entire brotherhood. But then the brotherhood in that case must obviously not be the aggregate of all individual Christians in the world's history, since most Christians by far participated not at all in the "testimony" of those martyrs whom the seer describes. In fact, most Christians had not the remotest notion, nor have we to this day, who those martyrs were or what precisely they said, though they said it as our spokesmen! Still, the brotherhood is on record as having been there, as they spoke and as they died, and it shares the credit with unabashed rejoicing. The brotherhood, consequently, must be a single totality, not a sum total but a one total—or, to call it by a name which I confess is not original with me, a "body." And this body is not merely reducible to its constituent members, even though these members are the bearers in fact of the body's action. In fact, there is always the possibility that the action of the body may be carried out even by those who themselves are not genuine members but "hypocrites" and "hirelings." Even so, if it is truly the word and the sacraments which they declare and administer, then, as the church had to affirm against the Donatists, the action in question is still the validly Christian—ecumenical and spiritual—action of the body as a whole, independently of the motives of the individual bearers.

Some indeed preach Christ from envy and rivalry, ... not sincerely but thinking to afflict me in my imprisonment. What then? Only in that every way, whether in pretense or in truth, Christ is proclaimed; and in that I rejoice. (Phil. 1:15-18)

And so, with equal right, does the entire brotherhood, knowing as it does that wherever "the word of their testimony" invokes "the blood of the Lamb" there is a victory for the whole brotherhood. "Rejoice then, O heaven and you that dwell therein!"

On what grounds does the church speak of herself as a corporate unity, a living organism which is not limited to any one time or place and which bodies forth as a single agent in every action done in the name of Christ? Her grounds for this assurance are biblical and her biblical grounds, as usual, are christological. Christ "is the head of the body, the church" (I Col. 1:18). "Now you are the body of Christ and individually members of it" (I Cor. 12:27). The grounds of this assurance, to put it negatively, are not the general sociological observations of our age which have rediscovered the solidarity of social existence. Nor are they the biological models in Whitehead's or Alexander's philosophy of organism, or the newer field theory in the sciences, or the creaturely interdependence in the stories of Hemingway. On the other hand, it would be sheer ingratitude on the part of the church—an ingratitude which the Russian Christians, in their broad concept of *sobornost*, do not commit—not to acknowledge that, without these secular promptings, she might well have forgotten again the *soma tou Christou* in her own New Testament. Wise ecumenical theologians are making the most of the rediscovery, particularly of its christological justification.<sup>41</sup> "... Christ [cherishes] the church, because we are members of his body" (Eph. 5:30). "... We, though many, are one body in Christ, and individually members one of another" (Rom. 12:5).

How exclusively it is Christ whom the church needs in order to act as one body becomes evident, not from abstruse ontological descriptions of the church, but from her own most ordinary churchly action, her use of the means of grace, word and sacraments. The church is where Christ is, but Christ is where his means of grace are. "Where two or three are gathered in my name," he promises, "there am I in the midst of them" (Mt. 18:20). I take this to mean that two or three Christians who are riding in a crowded bus, no one of them aware of the others' Christianity or even of the others' presence, would not yet constitute the church in whose midst Christ promises to be. The church is constituted not by the mere existence of Christians in the world, however closely they may jostle one another, but rather by their being gathered in the explicit name of their Lord, around his word preached and his sacraments administered. The Augsburg Confession says of "one holy church" that it "is the assembly of saints in which the Gospel is taught purely and the sacraments are administered rightly," and that "both the sacraments and the Word are effectual by reason of the institution and commandment of Christ even if they are administered by evil men."<sup>42</sup> Father Theodor Seeger has written about the ecumenical features in recent German Protestant and Roman Catholic liturgies. The one most prominent common factor in the major service of both confessions, he finds, is the polarity between Word and sacrament. Any effort to revitalize this service at its biblical sources and in its missionary appeal, Seeger concludes, must show the same bipolar concern for "authentic" proclamation of the word and "distinctively Christian" administration of the sacraments.<sup>43</sup> The church is present, not first where the word and sacraments are *believed*, but where they are being *preached and administered*, and the church which is present in that ministration, in that "communicating of holy things," is the one, holy, catholic and apostolic church.

---

<sup>41</sup> Robert S. Pelton, (editor) *The Church as the Body of Christ* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame press, 1963).

<sup>42</sup> Tapper, *op. cit.*, pp. 32-33.

<sup>43</sup> *Wort und Sakrament im Gottesdienst der Konfessionen* (Essen: Ludgerus Verlag, 1963), pp. 256-257.

May I become personal for a moment? If what you and I are saying to one another is the gospel, then the church is present here in her gospel independently of your or my personal relationship to either the gospel or the church. Our conversation is a case, then, of the church's calling to herself. Because Christ is present in his word and because the body is where her head is— "Where I am, there shall my servant be also" (Jn. 12:26) — therefore the whole holy Christianhood converges in such dialogue. Provided that what I am speaking is "the good and gracious word of God," then in that speaking, irrespective of my own status within the church, it is the church which speaks. How, in short, do we know it is the church? In the same way that we recognize the word as Christ's. How could Justin Martyr, in his apologia before the Roman authorities, speak so confidently in behalf of the universal Christian "we," who had not knowingly authorized his testimony and of whom only a fraction could have been known to him personally, and how could he be sure that "we" in fact embody all the glorious things he claimed for "us"? Answer: "It is Jesus Christ who has taught us these things, having been born for this purpose and crucified under Pontius Pilate...."<sup>44</sup>

Later on, when the end came, Justin and his fellow-martyrs would draw strength—or shall I say "power" or even "authority"?—from their solidarity with this Christian "we." "Do what you want," he finally cried to the prosecutor, "we are Christians"—as though their bond with the "Christians" explained their courage. "We wish to undergo vengeance for the sake of the Lord Jesus Christ and thus be saved."<sup>45</sup> Whom did Justin mean by "we"? Only those martyrs in his pitiful little band? Or all Christians? Probably he meant the former, but he was entitled to mean the latter. He had that authority upon earth. "If they persecuted me," Justin's Master had once said, "they will persecute you. . . . All this they will do to you on my account" (Jn. 15:20, 21). That was why Justin was authorized to die "for the sake of the Lord Jesus Christ." But it was by that very same authority that he could appeal to his association with the "Christians," and was right to be encouraged by it.

Only one person speaks here, but as we hear him we hear them all. He represents the whole, and the whole is his strength and support. He cannot speak for every individual because he cannot vouch for every individual, but he can speak for the community because it is community.<sup>46</sup>

"Resist [the adversary], firm in your faith," an earlier Christian had urged his fellow-martyrs, "knowing that the same experience of suffering is required of your brotherhood throughout the world" (I Pet. 5:9). "If one member suffers, all suffer together; if one member is honored, all rejoice together" (Rom. 12:26).

---

<sup>44</sup> *The First Apology of Justin the Martyr*, ed. and tr. by E. R. Hardy, in *Library of Christian Classics* (Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1953), vol. I, p. 249.

<sup>45</sup> Wemer Elert, tr. by C. V. Schindler, *The Chnstian Ethos* (Philadelphia: Muhlenberg Press, 1957), p. 354.

<sup>46</sup> Ibid., p. 353.

Similarly, as the Apology to the Augsburg Confession states, those confessors were of course not indifferent either to the discord which threatened or to their own peril. Yet their appeal was not for a right to dissent or even for a right to be heard as a group. Appealing in effect beyond their accusers, to God but also to the whole church, they confidently submitted their claim ("that we hold to the Gospel of Christ correctly and faithfully") to the judgment of Christendom, "all nations" and also "posterity," and thus they waxed bold in the universal company.<sup>47</sup> At the martyrdom of Polycarp, although this dauntless old man stood in the flames alone, the record reports that even the hostile mob saw him as a representative of a community: "the whole crowd marveled that there should be such a difference between the unbelievers and the elect."<sup>48</sup> That association would probably not have surprised Polycarp, for we are told something about the prayer he prayed in preparation for his burning—". . . his prayer, in which he remembered all who had met with him at any time, both small and great, both those with and without renown, and the whole Catholic Church throughout the world."<sup>49</sup> These examples of the church's apologists, confessors and martyrs (as of "our brethren" in the Apocalypse who "loved not their lives even unto death") are meant to make a point. May they remind the angelist, for whom the church is admittedly one but merely "invisibly" one, that the one church not only is visible—"hidden," as Luther would say, yes, yet hidden under quite bodily, observable activity—but also has power upon earth through these very visible embodiments to embolden the dispersed angels of Michael and to reassure the little flock of its immense connections.

All this, finally, comes to fruition at the level of grass-roots, back-fence ecumenism and in pastoral practice. What the pastor can do is to assure his flock of that body whose hands and feet and voices they are. This is not easy. They may understand well enough that when he, the pastor, is speaking to them—speaking the gospel to them—really the whole Christian body is speaking to them. That they may believe. But what they also have a right to remember is that when they in turn speak the words of forgiveness to their spouses, when they feed their hungry youngsters in the name of Christ, when they clothe the naked in the community in his name, they are not doing this on their own and alone but rather as the agents of the whole embodied Christ, in behalf of the brotherhood throughout the world. They may understand well enough, when they sing the *Te Deum* in public worship, that they are but the voices of "the glorious company of the apostles, ... the goodly fellowship of the prophets, ... the noble army of martyrs, ... the holy church throughout the world." That they may understand. What they are free to remember as well, because of the victory of Michael and all of his angels, is that when they are praising God with their acts of mercy in their weekday callings, healing all manner of diseases in Christ's name, casting out who-knows-what-kind of demons in his name, they are not then suddenly reduced to singing solo. Then and there, through them, "all the earth doth worship, . . . all angels cry aloud, the heavens and all the powers therein"—and "the holy church throughout all the world."

---

<sup>47</sup> Tappert, *op. cit.*, p. 99.

<sup>48</sup> The Martyrdom of Polycarp, ed. and tr. by M. H. Shepherd, Jr., in Library of Christian Classics, *op. cit.*, p. 155.

<sup>49</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 151.

The plainest Christians may understand that, when a Justin Martyr confessed his faith before his Roman accusers, he was testifying for all of us. That they may believe. What they are entitled to remember, too, is that when in their various callings they bear reproach and absorb the rebuff and shoulder the dear holy cross, they do so not in isolation but as the shoulders of the body of Christ, whole and entire. They may understand that, when I their pastor pronounce the absolution, it is valid and effectual even if I were a hypocrite and did not believe it myself. That they may know well enough. What they are also authorized to know is that when they, in the world, repay evil with good, even though they do so with mixed motives or weak faith, they nevertheless do it, and can do it avidly, as the agents of Christ and of his holy church. Will their knowing that tempt them to be hypocrites? Maybe. That, as we said before, is a risk. But it might also be the thing which will relieve them of that very self-concern, that preoccupation with their own fears and the divine criticism and the accusations of the adversary, which so quickly beget hypocrisy. Knowing that the work of the church, even her work through me, does not depend for its value on the purity of my heart--knowing that may be the very thing which bolsters and purifies my heart. The pastor owes his people this assurance of what cosmic company they keep. But he should also be warned that the practice of such a spirituality, once begun, is not easy to contain. Once Christian people know who all are singing along with them in the Thrice Holy on Sunday morning, ("with angels and archangels and all the company of heaven") once they know who all "our brethren" are who are conquering the accuser "by the blood of the Lamb and by the word of their testimony," they are likely to "rejoice." And only the Lord knows where that can lead.

Robert W. Bertram