

Churches Unity BX1

PROJECTS OF CHRISTIAN UNION

BY

J. W. POYNTER



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THE late Dr. J. Gairdner, in *Lollardy and the Reformation in England*,¹ thus described the “vision which appealed most of all to the heart of Cranmer:” it was that of “a true Catholicism throughout all Europe: the different Churches, in different countries . . . being branches of the true Church in every country, agreed in one common faith emancipated from the corruptions of Rome.” To bring about, if he could, the realization of this vision, Cranmer upheld the principle of the Royal Supremacy over the Church, and drew together Protestant theologians from all parts of Europe to aid in the formulation of what he and they believed to be a purified liturgical and doctrinal standard. Living three and a half centuries after

¹ Vol. iii., p. 321.

PROJECTS OF CHRISTIAN UNION

those times, we can see the essential mistake underlying those schemes. They were attempts to reconcile opposites: to combine unity of religion with rejection of historic religious authority. Of course, such a repudiation of historic authority is an act which cannot possibly be limited to one stage. If it was competent for Cranmer to reject the Papal authority, it was equally competent for the Puritans to reject the authority favored by Cranmer. Similarly, the process of separation, started by Luther in Germany, was from its very birth foredoomed to produce still further separations, until we come to the confused Christendom of our own days. "The hand which had pulled down the Roman Church in Germany made the first rent in the Church which was to take its place."²

Nowadays, religious people are very much concerned with proposals for, or aspirations towards, reunion. Why cannot Christendom be "one?"—or, at least, why cannot we have a "League of Churches?"

² *Cambridge Modern History*, ii., 209.

PROJECTS OF CHRISTIAN UNION

In considering any such problem as this, the first necessity is of course to get as near as we can to the root of the whole matter, and not to mistake unessentials—however important—for essentials.

What are the two fundamental facts of Christian history from its very beginning? We would suggest these: (1) Christendom—using that term as meaning all who call themselves Christians—never has been one united body; (2) Christianity's great historic claim has been that it embodies a Revelation.

Even in the works of writers as far removed as possible from "the trammels of ecclesiasticism," there are found the inevitable effects of the historic Christian claim to be a Revealed Religion. "A right understanding of theological doctrines," says, as representing the Society of Friends, Mr. Edward Grubb,³ "is not necessary for beginning or maintaining the Christian life." In another work,⁴ the same able writer re-

³ *Authority and the Light Within*, p. 43.

⁴ *What Is Quakerism?* p. 7.

PROJECTS OF CHRISTIAN UNION

marked that "men and women are seeking everywhere for a Truth that does not rest upon the precarious foundation of traditional creeds, but is firmly grounded on experience." Is this, however, even quite consistent as a theory? "A right understanding of doctrine is not necessary;" yet "men are seeking a Truth." What is a Truth (at any rate, as objectively related to mankind) but a doctrine rightly believed? What, again, is "the Christian life" but a life founded on ideas, about Christ, believed as true?

However, leaving this point for a time (though returning to it later), let us bring out the full bearings of the first of our two facts: namely, that Christendom, in the broad sense in which that word is generally used, never has been united.

"Marcion," said the author of *Supernatural Religion*,⁵ "produced a powerful effect upon his time, and although, during his own lifetime and long afterwards, vehemently and with every opprobrious epi-

⁵ *S. R.*, ed. 1902, p. 344; *cf.* Epiphanius, *Haereses*, xlii., 1.

PROJECTS OF CHRISTIAN UNION

that denounced by ecclesiastical writers, his opinions were so widely adopted that, in the time of Epiphanius, his followers were to be found throughout the whole world." The early Christian world, indeed, "was full of wild and seductive systems of speculation; and individual Christians were diverging into strange opinions on all sides. . . . 'Our all is at stake,' Athanasius truly said, in justification of his life-long conflict."⁶ Arians against Catholics; and not only so, but, amongst the opponents of the Catholics, there were subdivisions after subdivisions — Semi-Arians, Eusebians, Aetians, Eunomians, Acacians, Psathyrians, etc.

At another time, "the Novations seemed for a moment to be about to split the Catholic Church into halves."⁷ Again, "Valentinus came to Rome under Pope Hyginus (*circa* 140), and Cerdo came about the same time, and after him Marcion. . . . Before and after the year 200 came Apelles

⁶ Illingworth, *Personality*, Lecture 1.

⁷ Dom J. Chapman, *Bishop Gore and the Catholic Claims*, p. 23.

PROJECTS OF CHRISTIAN UNION

and Potitus, Basiliscus and Synaros, and a crowd of 'Adoptionists' and Monarchians. Under Eleutherius, Theodotus, the leather-seller of Byzantium, was in Rome with his disciples."⁸ So widespread and so powerful, indeed, were many of the early heresies, that they might well have seemed irresistible. "In spite of the Council of Chalcedon, Eutychianism remained powerful in the East, and supreme in Egypt."⁹

Ebionites, Gnostics, Montanists, "together with other shades of heresy, threatened to undermine the Church, and hence called forth the best talent of the Church to refute them."¹⁰ "Manichæism, as we shall see, was almost insuppressible, even when political changes had given to the Church a power of centralization and coercion."¹¹ Even in the seventh century, "the Greeks were engaged in the most bitter and viru-

⁸ Chapman, *ibid.*, p. 65.

⁹ Chapman, *The First Eight Councils and Papal Infallibility*, p. 44.

¹⁰ Wake and Lardner, *The Apocryphal New Testament*, p. 40.

¹¹ John M. Robertson, *Short History of Christianity*, pp. 123, 124.

PROJECTS OF CHRISTIAN UNION

lent controversy with the Paulicians, whom they considered as a branch of the Manichæan sect. . . . The dispute was carried to the greatest height under the reigns of Constans, Constantine Pogonatus and Justinian II.; and the Greeks were not only armed with arguments, but were also seconded by the force of military legions, and the terror of penal laws.”¹² “The distinctive doctrines of the (Manichæan) sect reappear among the Paulicians, the Cathari, the Albigenses, the Bogomiles, and other mediæval heretics.”¹³

What a sway *Donatism* had! “Still it spread, and in 330 (A. D.) no less than two hundred and seventy Donatist bishops met in council . . . Crowds of Donatists carried devastation through Africa.”¹⁴

In mediæval times the face of things was different, yet division was there. “In the very last year of this (tenth) century arose a certain teacher, whose name was Leu-

¹² Mosheim, *Church History*, trans. Maclaine, i., 164.

¹³ Addis and Arnold, *Catholic Dictionary*, ed. 1917, p. 546.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 286.

PROJECTS OF CHRISTIAN UNION

tard, who lived at Vertus, in the diocese of Chalons, and, in a short time, drew after him a considerable number of disciples.”¹⁵ “His disciples made a part of the sect that was afterwards known in France under the name of the Albigenses.”¹⁶ How terrible a page in mediæval history is that entitled “Albigensianism and the strife that arose from it!”

The Eucharistic controversies—the disputes over Abelard, Gilbert de la Porrée, the Catharists, the Petrobrussians; Arnold of Brescia, the Poor Men of Lyons, the Flagellants, the Lollards, the Calixtines: needless more than mere mention of names.

Modern projects of reunion must, then, bear in mind that a main fact of Christian history is that Christians have always been divided. We will now return to our other point, namely, the historic claim of Christianity to be a Revealed Religion. How is such a claim to be reconciled with Christendom’s perennial confusions?

Can we be justified in arguing from a

¹⁵ *Mosheim, op. cit., p. 229.*

¹⁶ *Ibid.*

PROJECTS OF CHRISTIAN UNION

League of Nations to a "League of Churches?" "The time is ripe for a 'League of Churches,' and, if organized Christianity is to make any contribution to the problems of our time, it must be formed."¹⁷ Is it not, however, a very perilous proceeding, to view political and religious projects as though they are similar in essence? Are they not, in fact, radically different? If the word "Religion" be taken merely in a vague sense, as not necessarily implying a Divine Being at all, but simply as relating to the duties of human beings to one another, then there may be an essential parity between political projects and those of religion. Such a use of the word, however, is at variance with history and directly contrary to Christianity. To Cicero, *religio* was far more than the relations and duties of man to man. Far more! *Religio deorum cultu pio continetur; Fanum Junonis tanta religione semper fuit, ut semper inviolatum sanctumque fuerit.* (The religion of the gods consists of pious worship. The tem-

¹⁷ Canon Streeter, in the *Daily News*, August 27, 1918.

PROJECTS OF CHRISTIAN UNION

ple of Juno has always been so greatly religious that it will always be inviolate and holy.) In Christianity, also, can "religion" be even conceived as other—in regard to its essence—than the sum of the relations between man and God? What, however, does this imply? What but this?—as Deity must necessarily be Absolute Truth and All Perfection, so religion is concerned with ultimate verity. Politics, on the other hand (where morality is not involved) is concerned with transient social adaptations. The spheres of the two things differ essentially, therefore; and what is true of one may be quite false of the other. Not, of course, that they do not touch or overlap. They must needs do so; but each has its own nature, and the ultimate criteria applicable to the one, are not the same as those applicable to the other. If God is All Truth, religion must be concerned with ultimate verity.

Of course, it is said that, even if this be so, truth has to be mediated to man, and man's mind is imperfect, so that he cannot

PROJECTS OF CHRISTIAN UNION

grasp it fully. It may be said (as by Canon Streeter in the *Daily News*, August 27, 1918) that each man has "at best a one-sided apprehension of truth." Or ultimate truth may be compared to a diamond of innumerable facets, of which each man sees one, or some, but no man sees all. These similes, however, do not carry us far. The difficulty presented by the "divisions in Christendom" is not that some people see some parts of truth and other people see other parts, and that all the parts are complementary. No! but the difficulty is that the various Christian sects, to an enormous extent and on quite fundamental matters, absolutely contradict one another, so that some tenets must in the nature of things not be "facets of truth" at all, but clearly false. Yet the historic claim of Christianity is that it is a Revealed Religion. What follows from such a claim, however? God is Supreme Truth. A revelation is something made known to man. A revelation from Supreme Truth must be definite truth made known to man. Not,

PROJECTS OF CHRISTIAN UNION

of course, that *all* that is truth is revealed; but, at any rate, all that is revealed is truth—and, moreover, as far as it goes it is *definite*: for, if it is not definite, how can it be *known*, and, if it is not known, how can it have been revealed? To hold this position it is not needful to be an “ecclesiastical obscurantist.” It has been shown, above, to be implicit in the premises even of the most radically “undogmatic” of denominations—the Quakers. Indeed, how, in the long run, can any form of Christian belief exist save by the possession of some criterion for separating true doctrine from error? The very word “belief” implies this. It is, therefore, futile to dream of a “League of Churches” established on any basis which would gloss over fundamental differences of belief. Reunion can only be accomplished on a basis of true doctrine in essentials.

Suppose, for the sake of argument, that all Protestant Christianity were to unite, either by “sinking their differences” for the purpose of amity or else by framing an

PROJECTS OF CHRISTIAN UNION

agreed formulary of common Protestantism. What would be the result? The Protestant Union would still be severed from Rome and from the various Eastern Churches, so that a true "League of Churches" would be far away still. Let us go, in imagination, a great step farther, and (even leaving out of consideration the great problem of the East) let us imagine that the new Protestant agglomeration were to approach "Rome" for terms of union. What is "Rome?"

In all parts of the world the Papal communion is found: here in great, historic, national Churches bound up with the life of a whole race or whole races; there, in large or small Churches in lands divided in religion; yonder, in missions to non-Christians. In Italy; in Spain; in Portugal; all over Europe; embracing practically the whole Christianity of South America and millions of the population of North; in Ireland, England, Scotland; in the Antipodes; even in Pekin, Tokio, India, Russia, Turkey. Whether in numerical power or

PROJECTS OF CHRISTIAN UNION

in numerical weakness, there is scarce a place where it is not found. Now, the significance of all this, from the point of view of a "League of Churches," lies in one simple fact: that is, that the whole of this vast historic communion depends upon *the truth of the doctrines which it proclaims as revealed*. Many doctrines, opinions, practices, devotions, etc., may doubtless be no parts of defined Revelation, and compromises are conceivable as possible thereon; but the fact remains that the communion of Rome holds that there are Revealed Doctrines *definitely settled* as such. Upon these she cannot even conceive compromise as possible; and the faith of her members, in all lands, is built upon that foundation as upon its rock. Suppose, now (*for the sake of argument*), that she were to come to terms with the hypothetical Protestant League referred to above, and, for the sake of a full "League of Churches," were to unsay the very principle of her being. What then?

From Italy to Argentine; from Tokio to

PROJECTS OF CHRISTIAN UNION

Melbourne; in London, in Glasgow, in Dublin, in Madrid, in Quebec, in the Far West, in New York; all over the world Catholics would be saying, in dismay: "The Church has unsaid herself; denied the principle of her life; her foundation, after all, was no rock, but a cloud which has given way beneath us!" This, then, is the only conceivable result of the "League of Churches" which is being dreamed of in many places now: chaos worse confounded than before, and collapse of belief all over the world. Cranmer had the vision of such a League three centuries and more ago, but it came to nothing. It is a mere dream.

What, then, from a Catholic point of view, is the truth about reunion? Christianity, being a Revealed Religion, must, as to its essence, consist of doctrines definitely capable of presentation as true. At the same time, we must bear in mind the kind of world to which they are presented: a world of innumerable human beings, each with his or her outlook and temperament differing from all others. These in-

PROJECTS OF CHRISTIAN UNION

finite variations of humankind have led many reasoners to conclude that Revelation need not be clear or definite in expression at all. No doubt there is an element of truth in this idea, but, taken as it stands, is it not a fallacy? A Revelation of Divine truth is made to a world of numberless human beings, each having free will and individual temperament. The result of the free will and different temperaments would, of course, be that large numbers would misinterpret the Revelation. Nevertheless, in spite of this, there must be *one true version* of the Revelation available, else there would be no real Revelation at all. It may be suggested, therefore, that the true theory is this: that, in spite of the natural misinterpretations due to private judgment, there must be in existence a true and definite body of Revealed Doctrine which is the criterion of Christian truth.

What is that criterion? It cannot be simply the Nicene Creed. That Creed is the symbol of a Council, and derives its authority from that Council. If, however,

PROJECTS OF CHRISTIAN UNION

we trust the Synod of Nicæa, why not the Synod of Trent, and if the Synod of Trent, why not that of the Vatican in 1870? Trent was denied by relatively at least as many opponents as the Vatican, and Nicæa by relatively at least as many as was Trent. Neither the Nicene bishops, nor the Nicene Creed, then, are, *by themselves*, an adequate ground of faith. The same may be said of "episcopacy." "Wherever there are valid bishops, there is the Church:" this will not do, for some of the greatest divisions in history have been between bishops equally valid as regards consecration. "The Bible," however—but who is to tell what the Bible means, or even of what books it consists? "Rome," and the Protestants, differ as to even what books compose the Bible! Are we, then, to fall back on simple, unaided "private judgment?" In that case, we drop all Revelation whatever; and, if we supplement "private judgment" with something else, what is that but to reintroduce Revelation and the need of a criterion?

PROJECTS OF CHRISTIAN UNION

What is the great feature of the Christian Church from its beginning up till now—the great feature which nothing has been able to obliterate, although vehement endeavors have never failed to be made to do so? It is the Papacy. Why, then, should not this be the key to the problem?

All codices of the New Testament attribute to Our Lord the promise that Peter was to be the rock upon which the Church should be built; and through all subsequent ages there has been one Institution, and one only, claiming this prerogative as Peter's heir. Every storm has assailed that Institution, but it has emerged though Empires have passed. At the Great Schism of the West, division seemed to assail its very heart; but it emerged intact. Then the Protestant revolt—but the Papacy emerged intact. Then Revolutions—but the Papacy is here, "eternally vivacious against the gates of death." Outside the bounds of its infallibility it has at times seemed to have been deflected—as in the Western Schism; but within the bounds of that infallibility

PROJECTS OF CHRISTIAN UNION

it has never failed at all. Does it not supply the key of our problem? This does not mean "cast-iron uniformity." As long as we hold what is defined as essential, our minds and hearts, and mutual charity, are free; and the fact that we have a firm basis on Truth, makes our freedom also fruitful. Even distinguished writers misunderstand this certitude of Catholic faith, as though it is a stereotyping of the mind or a denial of mental progress. "Both Rationalist and Romanist are," said Mr. H. G. Wells,¹⁸ "blind with the vanity of mental finality. The Rationalist knows exactly that that (the Supreme) something is It and not Him; the Romanist knows the exact contrary in clear detail. He knows indeed whether God's beard grows." Surely, even a brief reference to a Catholic theological text-book would have obviated this misapprehension. "The existence of theological mysteries is a doctrine of Catholic faith defined by the Vatican Council, which declares: 'If anyone say that in Divine Revelation there are

¹⁸ *First and Last Things*, ed. 1917, p. viii.

PROJECTS OF CHRISTIAN UNION

contained no mysteries properly so-called (*vera et proprie dicta mysteria*), but that through reason rightly developed (*per rationem rite excultam*) all the dogmas of faith can be understood and demonstrated from natural principles: let him be anathema.”¹⁹ “The nature of God, which is infinite and eternal, must be incomprehensible to an intelligence that is not capable of perfect knowledge.”²⁰ The Catholic Church, as has been remarked above, does not say (what indeed would not merely be untrue, but would be absurd) that all that is true about God has been revealed, but that all that has been revealed is true. Ought not this latter statement, indeed, to be so obvious as to be scarcely other than a truism? It ought to be obvious that, God being all Truth, two statements, at any rate, must be true of any Revelation from Him: (a) while it would not be claimed that it exhausted the whole of what is true, yet, so far as it went, it must be entirely true, and,

¹⁹ Sess. iii., *De fide et ratione*, can. i.—*Catholic Encyclopedia*, article “Mystery” (Vol. x., pp. 662-f.).

²⁰ *Ibid.*

PROJECTS OF CHRISTIAN UNION

therefore, incapable of being discarded, or superseded, as false in any degree; (b) the fact that it is a *Revelation* necessarily implies that it is *intelligible; i. e.*, that it takes the form of a definite doctrine, or body of definite doctrines.

Logically speaking, all this ought to be quite plain to all, following, as it does, inevitably from the very implications of the terms, "God," "Revelation" and "true." It is to be feared that much modern aversion from recognizing it arises, not from faults in its reasoning, but from unwillingness to accept certain particular doctrines to which it would lead. Yet, of such an attitude, what really can one say but that it is *prejudice*? Of such a form of judgment, however, Paley wrote, more than a century ago, in words which are amongst those—a number by no means small—of his which, true when written, are still true: [There is] "a principle which, in my judgment, will account for the inefficiency of any argument, or any evidence, whatever: namely, contempt prior to examination . . . Diony-

PROJECTS OF CHRISTIAN UNION

sius Halicarnassensis remarks that there were six hundred different kinds of religions or sacred rites exercised at Rome. The superior classes of the community treated them all as fables. Can we wonder, then, that Christianity was included in the number, without inquiry into its separate merits, or the particular grounds of its pretensions?"²¹ It being true, then, that the very idea of Revelation implies a clear body of definite doctrines (*dogmata*), then the fact that some people dislike some or all of those doctrines does not disprove the logic of the very nature of Revelation, but the very nature of Revelation shows that those people are wrong in their rejection of those particular doctrines.

Non-Catholic forms of Christianity, it is true, often—or even in the great majority of cases—themselves agree that there is a principle that “all that has been revealed must be true.” They seem, however, fatally to fail in the application of that principle. For example, in the Nonconformist dec-

²¹ Paley, *Evidences*, part iii., ch. 4.

PROJECTS OF CHRISTIAN UNION

laration in answer to Lambeth, it is said that they believe that the reunited Church will require some common declaration of faith, not to be used as a test, but to be a testimony and witness to the Lord and the Gospel. Surely, such ideas are confused! A "common declaration of faith" can only mean "a formulated statement of doctrine, believed to be true, about God and our relations to Him." But, if you are not going to make such a formula a "test" (*i. e.*, if you are going to allow people to belong to your Church and yet perhaps deny its formulated faith) then it follows you are not sure that it is true; in which case, what right had you to make it at all? If, on the other hand, you know that it is true, and yet allow people to be of your Church while permissibly disbelieving it, then this means that Church membership is consistent with denial of the known truth of God! With all respect, it must be suggested that the theological position of the "Free Churches" is not logically sound, for it has always maintained the reality of a Re-

PROJECTS OF CHRISTIAN UNION

vealed Truth, and yet has always refused definitely to accept the logical implication of that fact. Indeed, is not this the historic mark of non-Catholic Christianity? It lacks principles of certitude, it is contradictory, it lacks the principle of unity, it is chaotic.

Two quotations may here be made as countering objections as to the relations of religion towards science: "Apply yourselves energetically to the study of natural sciences: in which department the things that have been so brilliantly discovered, and so usefully applied, to the admiration of the present age, will be the object of praise and commendation to those who come after us."²² And: "Under no circumstances will the Church ever refuse to accept a scientific fact . . . but there must be question of *certain facts*, and not of *mere theories*, found necessary to give consistency to still other theories."²³

²² Leo XIII., Allocution of March 7, 1880; repeated by Pius X., Encyclical on "Modernism," September 8, 1907.

²³ Father J. Husslein, S.J., Ph.D., *Evolution and Social Progress*, 1920, p. 197, *cf.*, *The Popes and Science*, by Dr. James J. Walsh.

PROJECTS OF CHRISTIAN UNION

As regards schemes of, or aspirations towards, "Christian reunion," the conclusions seem to be, therefore, these: Free-will sufficiently accounts for the existence of divisions in belief, and also makes it improbable that, in our present state of being, such divisions are destined to disappear. With regard to present non-Catholic efforts towards union, no one will deny the nobility of the intentions, or the deep earnestness of the spirit, of those who are making those efforts; but, with all respect for that evident nobility and earnestness, it must yet be said that those who are making these non-Catholic efforts are either going in a direction not leading to the goal, or, if they are in the right direction, then they are so far from the goal that, before they reach it, their ideas of its nature will be drastically altered. *Unity is the distinctive mark of "Rome." Disunion is the—or, at least, a—distinctive mark of Protestantism. Unity, however, is not only "Roman," but it is also true: in the sense that it is an indispensable mark of the visible Church established by*

PROJECTS OF CHRISTIAN UNION

Our Lord. Non-Catholics are realizing the fact of its truth—its indispensability; but they do not yet realize the equal fact that it is essentially “Roman,” and that Christian reunion is only attainable by communion with Rome. This, however, will have to be realized. One of the fallacies, hindering this realization, seems to consist in an untenable notion of the meaning of “union:” the taking of that word to mean, namely, compromise on belief—whereas, of course, the nature of Revelation involves quite the opposite.

The Archbishop of York, speaking at the Manchester conference of Nonconformists, said of “Rome,” that “no man who had breathed the air of freedom would enter that bondage again.” This impression is a very common one, but it is mistaken. Why, indeed, should the fact that a person has beliefs, of the truth of which he is *certain*, imply that he is in a deplorable “bondage?” If it does, then either men ought not to be sure of anything, or else men ought to be slaves! It may, rather, be suggested that

PROJECTS OF CHRISTIAN UNION

certainty on fundamentals (and this is all that Rome requires) is absolutely necessary to fruitful developments of any kind. Suffice it to say, however, that actual experience of the Roman communion is very different from what the Archbishop of York, from an exterior point of view, supposes.

The Rev. W. L. Lee, Moderator of the London Province of the Congregational Union, said (speaking on April 5, 1921, as reported in the *Westminster Gazette*): "The first step to reunion is the decision of one communion that another body, claiming to be a communion of the Church, is in its corporate functions a communion of Jesus Christ," and he added that "we cherish the desire to see the Church of Jesus Christ manifestly one in the world." In respectful comment upon this, one or two queries must be made. Is *the Roman communion* "in its corporate functions a communion of Jesus Christ?" If the answer be made that it is not, then those who so reply take upon themselves the onus of

PROJECTS OF CHRISTIAN UNION

excommunicating and anathematizing the greatest communion in Christendom, past or present; and, not only so, but of applying those censures to the communion which is peculiarly distinguished for its adherence to the idea of "union:" the very idea in the minds of those censuring her! If, on the other hand, the Roman communion is "in its corporate functions a communion of Jesus Christ," then it would follow that its fundamental principles must be true, for no one will suggest that a body could be a communion of Jesus Christ and yet the characteristic basis of its polity be opposed to His will! It follows, then, either that those who long for reunion are on a wrong track altogether, or else that they will ultimately be brought, by very logic, to communion with Rome, and to the beliefs that such communion implies. It is the conclusion even of *their own* logic!

The fact that many people reject the Church which agrees with the essential requirements of the very nature of Revelation, does not make that Church any less

PROJECTS OF CHRISTIAN UNION

the true messenger of Christ, but only makes it evident that, however sincere those people be, yet their ideas of Revelation are inadequate, and that they should seek, as their goal, communion with that Church. The Papacy makes to be intelligible what otherwise is incoherent: creeds, Councils, Biblical doctrine, episcopacy, Church life. These things, taken by themselves, are beyond measure confused; but, in the union of the Catholic communion of the Holy See, they become intelligible. We would say what, centuries ago, St. Jerome said in his youth: "It is but with the successor of the fisherman and the disciple of the Cross that I speak;" or, again, what he said many years later, near the end of his long life: "I feel that I ought, with the deepest affection, to give you this advice, to hold the faith of holy Innocent, who is the successor and son of that man and of the Apostolic See."²⁴

²⁴ St. Jerome, *Epp.* XV. and CXXX.

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