

OUR COMMON CHRISTIANITY

INTRODUCTION

On Wednesday of this past week, I attended the monthly meeting of our East Midtown Ministerial Association. The meeting was held at St. James' Episcopal Church. For those of you who are not familiar with this organization, let me mention in passing that it is a ministerial association that brings together some forty or more of the ministers of the various Protestant Churches here on the East Side from 42nd Street to 96th Street.

Our speaker last Wednesday was Mr. James Haughey. Mr. Haughey was invited to speak to this group of ministers on the subject: "What Would Catholics Have Protestants See As Significant In the Work of the Vatican Council?" Mr. Haughey is a layman of the Roman Catholic Church. He received his education at Villinova, and over the years has been interested in the dialogue between Catholics and Protestants.

It was my privilege to introduce him to this group of Protestant ministers, and because of this I made a point of getting there a few minutes early in order to have an opportunity to talk to him before the meeting got under way. We sat next to each other at the luncheon, and it was not long before I began to realize that this man has all the marks - the unmistakable marks - of a real Christian. He spoke like one, and his gracious spirit seemed to reflect what theologians today are calling the Christian style of life.

I thought to myself as I sat there listening to him speak on the significant work of the present Vatican Council, can it be, that, in spite of our ecclesiastical divisions and the many things that separate us from each other, there is something that we can call basic Christianity, something common to us all, something that people who are not Christians, would recognize as unique? I knew that my answer would be "yes" because I have seen it so many times. I have seen it many times in people of other denominations and non-Protestant traditions. I have seen it in a devout woman who lived across the street from me when I was boy and who was a Christian Scientist. I saw it in a close college friend who was a Quaker. I have seen it in a man who is a member of one of the Pentecostal sects; I have seen it in a person who is a minister of the Greek Orthodox Communion. I was sure, therefore, that there was something that we could call basic, or common Christianity, something that lies underneath our doctrinal, liturgical differences and divisions, and binds us together in one body.

What I should like to try to do this morning is to put my finger on what it is; and if you have ever tried to do this, you will know that it is not an easy thing to do. What is it that this gentleman of the Roman Catholic Church, this woman who is a Christian Scientist, this man who is a Quaker, the person from the Pentecostal tradition, the minister of the Greek Orthodox tradition all have, so that if you saw any one of them in a strange land you would know at once that they were Christians? What is this thing all Christians have in common?

DEVELOPMENT

There is a clue in a remarkable novel called "Barabbas", and after having seen the movie "Barabbas" this past Friday evening, I must say that the spectacular moving picture version of it, I feel, loses the real drama of the book in a cloud of gladiatorial dust. Barabbas, you may remember, was the criminal whom the people chose to be released on the Jewish festival and Jesus was crucified in his place. He was a ruffian who had never known a mother or a father. He was unable and unwilling to believe in Jesus, but he could not get him out of his mind.

Early in the story a girl appears who had been an intimate part of his earlier life. She had a hare lip which made it difficult for her in many ways. While Barabbas was in prison, she had encountered Jesus. Whatever it was that happened had changed her life completely. She believed in him, and her relationship with Barabbas was entirely changed. Barabbas was completely bewildered by this sudden change. He asked her very simply what Jesus had taught. She was reluctant to answer. He asked her a second time. "What did he teach?" And, looking on the ground, she said, "Love one another" That was all. "Love one another". He taught us to love and to care for others.

One of the unmistakable signs of our common Christianity is a real concern for other people, a love of human beings. It is more than kindness, infinitely more than that, although it has something in common with kindness. It goes far beyond kindness; much deeper than kindness. It doesn't mean that you always agree with a person or that you always approve of what he does, or even that you always like him. It means that you have a feeling of being somehow related to him, of somehow of being in union with him. It means that you have a desire that this relatedness be closer than it now is. If there is a misunderstanding; if there is friction, you try to wipe it out with friendship; if there is any antagonism between you, you try to overcome it by something supernatural, like the love of God, if you cannot work it out any other way. Whatever this is, you know it when you see it, don't you? ~~You recognize it and sense it at once. Can you think of any great Christian soul down through the ages who has not had this warm outreach toward other human beings to some degree.~~

The Vatican Council which has been meeting now for some time has an enormous amount of pomp and ceremony and splendor, all the red tape that is inevitably associated with any assemblage as large as this. Our speaker last Wednesday remarked that if you want to speak on the Council floor for five minutes that you must in order to do this apply for permission three to four days ahead of time. I thought to myself "why that's worse than a Methodist Annual Conference". ~~And yet what a fine idea. I suppose a lot of the men forget what they wanted to say by the time that three days have past.~~ But seriously, what is the one thing that has cut through all of the ceremony and red tape and risen to the surface? It is the Pope's real love of human beings, natural and unaffected. Everyone senses it, and I should not be at all surprised that this council would never have taken place if it had not been for this. Our speaker on Wednesday summed it up in a few simple words: "It has been the Pope's interest in people that has stood out above all else".

If you find a person totally lacking in this sort of human outreach, this kind of awareness and sensitivity to other people and their needs, you can be sure that he has not been really touched by Christianity. He may be a member of a church; he may be meticulously orthodox from a doctrinal point of view; his morals may be impeccable; but if he has no love, he has never really been touched by Christianity. "Caring is everything" said Baron von Hugel as he was dying, and his whole life confirmed it. This is the first thing that all Christians have in common.

A SECOND THING We return to the girl in the novel, the girl with the hare lip. When Barabbas asked her what Jesus taught, she didn't tell him everything. She couldn't; there was too much to tell. She simply put her finger on what she thought was the most important thing, but she didn't even finish that sentence. The way it actually goes in St. John's Gospel is this way: Jesus said, This is my commandment that ye love one another, as I have loved you. Do you see what else is involved. This gives us a clue to another thing we have in common. A Christian is a person who is loved and who knows that he is loved. He doesn't go around talking about it, but this is the thing that makes the difference in his life, the fact that he knows that there is someone who loves him and who cares for him, who undergirds every hour of his life.

The girl herself was a perfect example of it. She described to Barabbas her first encounter with Jesus and it went something like this. She was on the dusty road watching him go by. She didn't ask him to cure her deformity, although it would have been a great blessing to her if he had, because very few people could understand what she said. She didn't ask him to do that, she said, because he did great things and her life deformity was not worth asking him to stop to cure. After he had passed, he turned back and said to her: "Do you, too, expect miracles of me?" And she said, "No Lord, I don't. I only watched as you passed by". Then with a look of tenderness and sorrow such as she had never seen, he touched her mouth. Nothing happened to it, and he said to her, "You shall bear witness for me" She was bound to him for life.

You can see why, can't you. Into that life which had gone awry, which was one of the damaged lives of humanity, of which there are so many, into that life suddenly came something like real care and love, and she felt that she was worth something. And everything from that moment on was different; and she was bound to him for life.

This was true of the greatest and the least in that early company of people who followed Jesus. What was unique about them was that they were aware of the fact that someone cared about them enough to do something for them and more and more they came to see that God was doing something for them through Jesus, that through him the very energies and vitalities of the love of God were at work. Basically, therefore, a Christian is a person who is not cosmically lost. He is bound into the very nature of things by this love of God revealed to us in Christ, and made real to us by him. To this person, therefore, he is forever bound, no matter how he may fail him, no matter how far he may fall from the ideal he seeks to achieve. To this person he is forever bound in loyalty.

This is the first thing that all Christians have in common, and one rather unpleasant fact that we must face at this point (and I hesitate to say it) - sometimes we see this to an almost embarrassing degree in people who are not inside the church, sometimes we see it to an almost embarrassing degree in people who are not even Christians. I know of Jews who have it. Gandhi had it. Lincoln, who never identified himself with any particular branch of the Christian Church had it to an unbelievable degree. While those of us who in a sense are on the "inside" of the Christian movement sometimes to an embarrassing degree are lacking in this fundamental and basic virtue of the Christian faith.

INTRODUCTION

It is a joy to share in this meeting with you.....to have the opportunity to talk to you on this occasion.

I'm sorry that my wife is not with me.....however, she and the children are visiting ~~the~~ grand parents in South Carolina. She felt badly in not being able to be present.

Last summer, when your program chairman approached me about speaking I was on vacation in Maine.....at the shore.....far away from my books and my study.....and I chose attitle that I felt would be in keeping with the Lenten season and sent it back: "What Jesus Meant By the Cross"

Since then, however, I have been aware of things happening in our world that have claimed our attention and rather than speak to you on the subject that I previously suggested, I am going to talk to you informally here on the subject of "OUR COMMON CHRISTIANITY"

We have heard a great deal in recent months about the Vatican Council.....and before that New Delhi....and the word "Ecumenical" is on our lips more than ever before... and meeting is soon to be held at Oberlin which will touch upon the Blake Pike proposal...concerning the merger of four major denominations....in view of all of this it seem s that this is one of the most vital issues concerning Christian people today...

OUR COMMON CHRISTIANITY

INTRODUCTION

Earlier this year, I attended the monthly meeting of our East Midtown Manhattan Ministerial Association. This particular meeting (I believe it was the January meeting) was held in St. James' Protestant Episcopal Church. For those of you who are not familiar with this organization, let me mention in passing that it is a ministerial association that brings together some forty or more of the ministers of the various Protestant Churches here on the East Side from 42nd Street to 96th Street.

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What I should like to try to do this morning in the time we have together is to put my finger on what it is, and if you have ever tried to do this, you will know it is not the easiest thing to do. What is it that this gentleman of the Roman Catholic Church, this woman who is a Christian Scientist, this man who is a Quaker, this person from the Pentecostal tradition, the minister of the Greek Orthodox tradition all have, so that if you saw any one of them in a strange land you would know at once that they were Christians? What is this thing that all Christians have in common.

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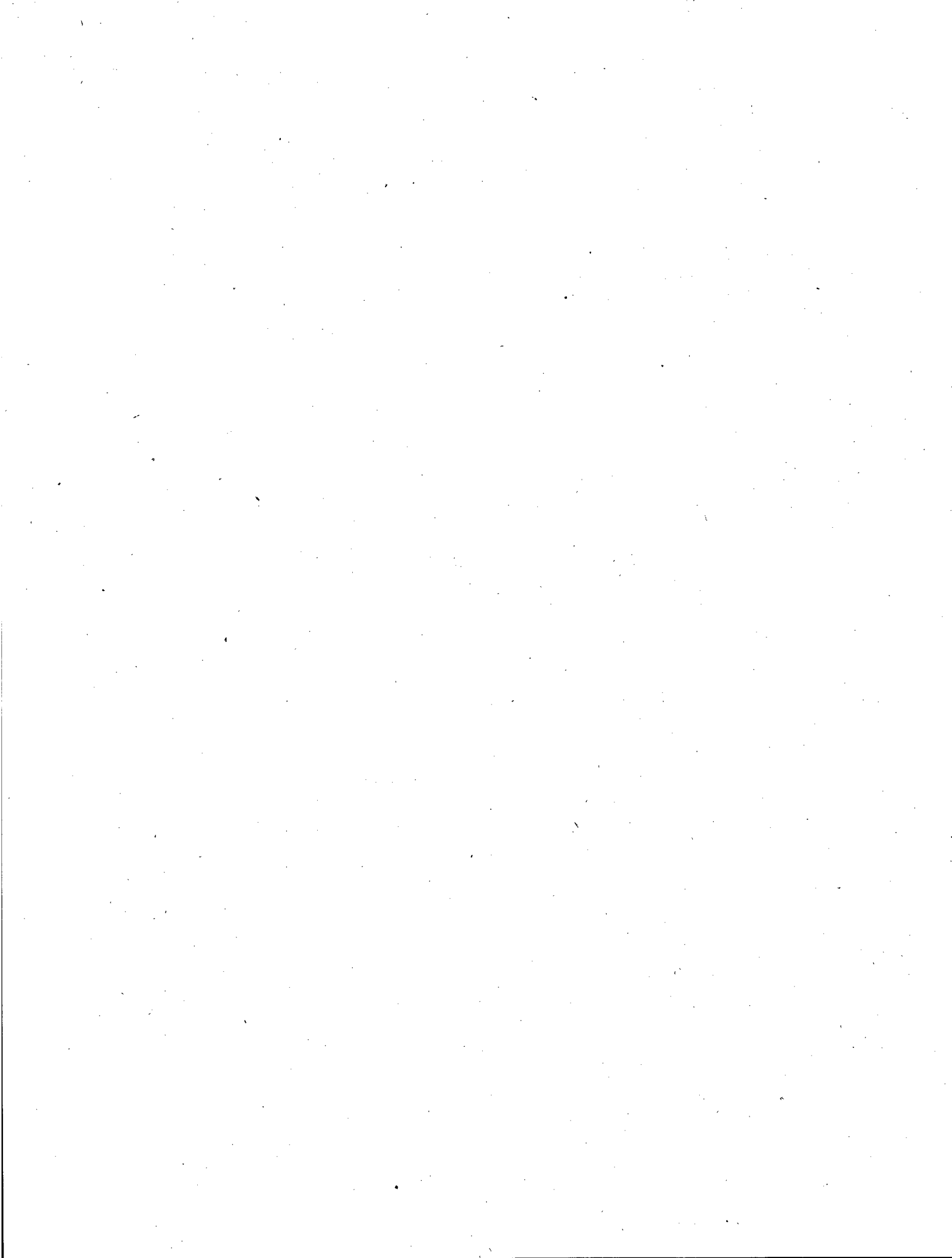
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The Vatican Council, the first session of which adjourned several weeks ago, had an enormous amount of red tape and ceremony and splendor, all the red tape that is inevitably associated with any assemblage as large as this. The speaker at this ministerial meeting that I referred to in the beginning of this talk remarked that if you wanted to speak on the floor of the council for five minutes you had to apply for permission three to four days ahead of time. I thought to myself as he said this - "Why that's worse than a Methodist Conference". But seriously, what is the one thing that has cut through all of the ceremony and red tape and risen to the surface. It is the Pope's real love of human beings, natural and unaffected. Everyone senses it, and I should not be at all surprised that this council would never have taken place if it had not been for this.

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NEW DIMENSION

This, you see, adds a new dimension to what we have called our basic, common Christianity. For one thing it puts at the very center of the whole thing an attachment to a particular person. Attachment, perhaps, is not right word. It isn't strong enough, but for the present I am trying to avoid the traditional, conventional religious words. I hope you can see what I mean. If you have ever see a young boy who loves baseball with an attachment to Mickey Mantle, you will have a faint idea of what I am talking about. It is an attachment that is a mixture of admiration, idolization and a desire to copy his style and make it his own.

This attachment is in response to something that Jesus has done, either directly or indirectly. If a doctor sees you through a critical illness, and not only does his duty, but sits by your bedside day and night, not only caring for your body, but trying to help your spirit carry on, if the doctor sees you through a critical illness like that, you are attached to him forever. If God - in Christ - somehow sees you through the most critical periods of your life, your sins and successes, your joys and sorrows, your losses and your gains, if God in Christ Jesus sees you through these critical periods of your life you will be attached to him forever. And one of the signs of your attachment will be the way you treat other people. You will try to treat them the way he treated them, namely as people who belong to him, as people for whom he did the same thing that he has done for you.

I realize we have been moving through deep waters in these past few minutes, and so let me put it before you simply and briefly here at the end in the way of a summary: a person who has what I would call for lack of a better word basic or common Christianity is marked by three things. (1) He is drawn to the man Jesus and binds himself to him. (2) He see and he feels in the man Jesus, the love of God breaking through to us in a way that has never been surpassed in the history of mankind. (3) And because he is loved, he can love, and he can walk serenely and confidently through life without fear trusting in the power of that love.

This then is the unity we now have. This is our common Christianity. And while we work and pray for greater unity among the churches, as the Vatican Council is doing in the Roman Catholic Church, and as the fruits of their labors may bring about great unity in all the churches, while we do this we will concentrate on this still greater unity we already have. And from time to time we will pause and look at ourselves and ask ourselves questions like these: Have I the marks of a Christian? Would anybody know I am one if I were in a strange, alien land? Am I really bound to Christ. Is my loyalty to him transcending all of my lesser loyalties? Do I walk as one who is aware of the love of God which he revealed? And can I love other because God loves them?

PRAYER: Open our hearts and minds, O God, to the love that comes to us in Christ Jesus. Help us to know him, not only as one who lived hundreds of years ago, but as one who is alive now among us in our midst, the Spirit, the Presence, the Power, the Reality, the Way, the truth and the Life; that knowing him, we may be able to do the things that he asks us to do. Amen