

The Ecumenical Society Of The Blessed Virgin Mary

George Spencer- Ecumenical Enthusiast.

Annual Conference, July 2003, Coldingham

Amanda Luscombe-Hill

George Spencer believed that Christian Unity could be achieved by prayer, such prayer being the petition of the poor and humble. His maxim was that whatever is possible can be done; and he who began life as the Honourable George Spencer ended it as Fr. Ignatius of St Paul, a Passionist, dying, if not as he had hoped in a ditch, at least half way up a friend's drive on a missionary journey. He was driven, like Wesley, by the keenest missionary zeal. He was unique in a great many ways, not least in his work in the campaign for prayer for Christian unity. He was a pioneer ecumenist. As Rector of Brington, he made a point of contacting the local Methodists and Dissenters and having discussions with them. It is hardly surprising then that, after becoming a Catholic, he continued to discuss religious questions with all whom he met, notably with the growing number of young men at both Oxford and Cambridge whose churchmanship formed the germ of what was to become known as the Oxford Movement.

Once he became a Catholic priest, he was, of course, under a much stricter discipline; finally, when he chose to join the Passionist order, there were even more restrictions placed upon his freedom of initiative. Given these constraints, his life's work in preaching and practising the message of prayer for unity is indeed exemplary. He had a deep and abiding trust in the power of prayer. He wrote, in 1840, 'We must always persevere in the prayer to which we have committed ourselves: pray, cause others to pray, move our saints and others to do so. Nothing can resist the prayer of a saint, and nothing can prevent us from becoming saints...'¹.

He was convinced that the unity for which Christ prayed was achievable, and, for him, with his background, the major goal was the reunion of the Catholic and Anglican churches. He was no theologian but a practical Christian with a deep confidence in the power of prayer. He wanted as many people as possible, in both these churches to pray for unity, believing that if heaven was stormed a great victory would be won.

In 1850, Fr. Ignatius, as he by then was, wrote, in an article in the *Catholic Magazine and Register*, 'I have nor had so much trouble from the answers of Protestants as from those of Catholics, partly because I have not, till lately, had so much to say to them on the subject, and partly, perhaps, because I more readily excuse them on the ground of ignorance. But I have had plenty of cold water thrown on me by them likewise. The song of too many is, that reunion is impossible; whereas I simply answer, if the two parties both wished to be united, so far from this being impossible, that it is infallibly sure that they would be united and that soon. So, when one tells me that union will never take place among Christians till the millennium comes, another till the Jews are converted and the like,- I answer so much the better. If that is the case, we may then make sure of seeing the commencement of the millennium, or of the conversion of the Jews, about the middle of next July at the latest; for, if we do but please, nothing can hinder our all being one in the truth before the autumn'².

The above paragraph was omitted when the article was reprinted in the *Tablet*, but it has all the flavour of the enthusiast who believes that nothing is impossible to God.

Spencer's continuing desire to involve other Christian ministers in his campaign often called forth distrust from Catholic colleagues, who sought to remind him of the principle of *communio in sacris*, whereby joint services with separated Christians were expressly forbidden. In his bid to widen interest in his prayer initiative, he visited the offices of the SPCK, the Bible Society, the Society for Promoting Christianity among Jews and the Church Missionary Society. He reported to his friend Lord Clifford, then in Rome, 'that all the secretaries received me with the same courtesy, although I arrived as a Passionist, and I have never felt conscious of having compromised anything that was taught me as Catholic principle'³. As Lord Clifford was aware of the suspicions held about Spencer, he felt it necessary to write

to the Superior general of the Passionists, relating 'how badly some Catholics in England have treated Fr. Ignatius by making him suspect, at least amongst themselves, of being poorly informed about catholic doctrine, particularly in the matter of *communio in sacris*'⁴.

The superior, Fr. Antonio Testa, in his reply, states the Roman view of Spencer's activities, 'I find there is a difference between encouraging Protestants to pray for light and encouraging them to pray for a general unity in the truth... Yet if encouraging them to pray, he makes sure that they understand that the Catholic Church can never allow changes to be made in its doctrines, then this distinction is to a certain degree abrogated; and it then seems that he may allow himself to encourage them to pray. It would be easier if he would encourage them to pray to receive the light by which the truth may be known... I have written to Fr. Ignatius, that he should encourage prayer to receive light and grace in order to know the truth... The Holy Father granted indulgences to the faithful who prayed a 'Hail Mary' for the conversion of England. Thus he has received all he can get and, according to my judgement, the Holy See will not allow more to be permitted. It will allow things to take their course that Protestants also be encouraged to pray, but it will never happen that the Holy See positively approves of their prayers'⁵.

Newman, as a Catholic, used to have a recurring nightmare that he was officiating at an Anglican altar; he would wake relieved to find it was not true. I mention this because I think it illustrates the mindset of these deeply sensitive men who made the very difficult decision to leave the Church which they had loved in their youth and submit to Rome. I use the verb submit advisedly because they were most punctilious in obeying the letter of the law as laid down by the authority of the Church. This was due, in no small part, to their conversions stemming from a deep belief in the Apostolic Succession and the recognition of the spiritual power of the magisterium.

For this reason, they had to temper the plans born out of the enthusiasm which they had experienced on conversion, when their ideas failed to gain ecclesiastical approval. So, while we can hail Fr. Ignatius Spencer as one of the earliest ecumenists in these islands, we find his initiatives curbed not only by the limitations of his times, but also by the strictures of church authority.

The Catholic Church of Spencer's day saw itself as the sole repository of truth, and the whole notion of unity to be the reunion of Christians outside of the fold with itself.

Having sketched the ecclesiastical setting of his life's work, I will now introduce George Spencer to you. He was the fifth son and eighth child of the second Earl Spencer. He was born ten days before the end of the eighteenth century, at the Admiralty. As the youngest son, he was told, at the age of eleven, that he was destined for the Church, a career that immediately seemed agreeable to him. So, after obtaining a first class degree at Cambridge, at that time attributable more to rank than genius, he performed the obligatory Grand Tour. This first journey was interrupted by rumours of the death of his brother but, these proving false, he resumed his travels. It was in Paris, at, of all places, the Opera House, that he received what he always subsequently considered a deep intimation of divine revelation. As he later wrote, 'I knew that God, who knew what was within me, must look on me as one in the same class as Don Giovanni, and, for once, this holy fear of God's judgement saved me: and this holy warning I was to find in an opera house in Paris⁶.

So, it was with this new commitment that, on his return, Spencer was ordained deacon the day after his twenty third birthday and priest on Trinity Sunday 1824. Coincidentally, Newman was ordained deacon on the latter date.

Spencer was first curate, then, within only a few months, rector of the family living at Brington, close to the family home of Althorp. He was a diligent and pastoral clergyman. It seems a foreshadowing of his later career that he made every effort to encourage the villagers to be get baptised and to return to the Church for the prayer and for the sacrament, which was then by rarely administered. Nor were the poor neglected. He even went so far as to attend the dissecting rooms in Northampton in order to learn about medicine so that he might alleviate the sickness of body of his people as well as attempting to minister guidance to their souls.

The contemporary Church of England was somewhat somnolent. It was a broad, comfortable church, content with its place both in state and countryside. The bogey

across Europe had been defeated, and, while churchmen and politicians alike spoke of reform and the problem of Catholic emancipation, the position of the established Church seemed unassailable. There was growing criticism of the wealth of bishops and the holding of multiple benefices, but none of this unrest had reached rural Northamptonshire.

George Spencer learn his trade from contact with neighbouring clergy, since no formal ministerial training was then given. As to his spiritual development, he was free to explore the Christian faith by reading as widely as he chose. When attempting to persuade local Dissenters and Methodists to return to the Church, he based his arguments around the high church teaching on the divine authority of the Church and the apostolic succession, which he had absorbed from Daubeny's *Guide to the Church*, lent to him by a neighbouring clergyman. When Dr. Emsley, the Professor of Ancient History at Oxford, told him that these teachings were really only applicable to Catholics and could not really be used by Anglicans, his 'high churchism', in his own words, collapsed 'like a pack of cards'⁷.

This sent Spencer back to the dissenters without the central plank of his argument. It did not send him towards the Catholics, whom he felt instinctively to be in error. The views of the nonconformists began to influence Spencer as he had an open mind; their evangelical approach seemed assured and Bible based and he began to use their vocabulary, talking of conversion experiences and the like. When he attended Bishop Blomfield, then Bishop of Chester, on his visitation journey, he went so far as to lecture him from what he considered the moral high ground of his regenerate position when confronted with an unreformed easy going religion. He was not invited a second time.

At this time, he also began to have problems with the Athanasian Creed, not with the major truths per se, but with the anathema pronounced upon those who would not accept the doctrine of the Trinity. He reasoned that this was not a doctrine set out as such in the Bible, and that to insist that the gates of heaven were sealed against any who could not subscribe to it was an untenable position. So, eventually, he omitted the Creed from his services and offered to resign his living. His family were most concerned, but his bishop chose not to act against him, and he continued as a

diligent pastor and assiduous student. He described his then state of mind and his continuous search for unity,

‘ I lost no opportunity of discussing with ministers of all persuasions. I called upon them all to join with me in the inquiry where was the truth, which could be but one, and therefore could not be in any two contrary systems of religion, much less in all the variety of sects into which Christians are divided in England. I found little encouragement in any quarter to this way of proceeding, at least among Protestants...My brethren of the established Church equally declined joining me in my discussions with persons of other persuasions, and disapproved of my pursuit, saying that I should never convert them to our side, and that I ran the risk of being shaken myself. I considered that if what I held were truth, charity required that I should never give over my attempts to bring others into the same way, though I were to labour all my life in vain’⁸.

This could almost be the testament of George Spencer; his discussion with one minister led him to consider that the Scriptures should be examined not with private judgement, but under the guidance of church tradition. This took his search in a new direction.

In November 1827, he received the first of three anonymous letters, the writer of which seemed to be questioning the truth of the claims of the Catholic Church, and requesting Spencer’s advice. This he readily gave, and the correspondent in Lille, who seemed determined to join the Catholics, gave strong arguments for their position. Far from persuading the writer to abandon this aim, Spencer began, for the first time, to consider the Catholic claims and to realise the amount of common ground held between that Church and his own. This led him to hold discussions with two Catholic priests, Fr. Foley and Dr. Fletcher, in Northampton. Then he met Ambrose Phillips, an enthusiastic young convert. An invitation from him led to his making a visit to Phillips’ father’s estate, Gavendon Park, where, on 30 January 1830, Spencer became a Catholic.

This was the culmination of a long, conscientious search for the truth. When he had left Brington the previous Sunday, he had planned to return for the next week’s

service, but he felt he could not, in conscience do this, and resigned with immediate effect. His father and, indeed, all his family, while regretting his decision, made certain that he had generous financial support to compensate for the loss of his £3,000 a year stipend. None of his family followed him into the Church.

As a Catholic, he was under the jurisdiction of Dr. Walsh, Vicar Apostolic of the Central District. He was sent to the English College at Rome for the first theological training he had ever experienced. This seemed the right decision, bearing in mind it was only the first year after Catholic emancipation, when, as yet, few converts had been made and Catholics were still thin on the ground in England. Spencer seems to have enjoyed his time in Rome, where he was quite a celebrity as a young nobleman. He made the acquaintance, amongst others, of a young Passionist priest, Dominic Barbieri, whose life long ambition was to go to England as a missionary.

The Passionists were then a relatively young order, having been founded the century before by Christ Paul of the Cross. He had a vision of his order working in England. Part of the enthusiasm behind the English mission was the Continental perception that the English Church was little different from the Gallican Church and that church divisions were primarily political. Also, the pre-eminence of the British Empire meant that if England could be reunited with the Holy See, then the whole world could be conquered. As we know, this was a fond illusion, but the presence of George Spencer in Rome gave promise of some movement in his native land.

He was ordained as a Catholic priest on the feast of St Augustine of Canterbury. He was sent to West Bromwich, where a small church was being built. He later paid for another to be constructed at Dudley. While raising subscriptions, he even asked Princess Victoria and her mother, the Duchess of Kent, indicative of the circles in which he moved. When soliciting prayers for unity, he twice approached the young Queen Victoria, to whose children his sister, Lady Littleton was governess. When he wasn't funding churches, the residue of his still considerable income was given to the poor. Whilst he had much more to do than in his days as an Anglican, his enthusiasm for inter-church contacts was undiminished and he began, once again, to think in terms of prayer for unity.

This increased in 1838, when Spencer was in Paris and persuaded the leaders of the French church to instruct their priests to offer mass every Thursday for the conversion of England. He then returned to England, where he began to visit religious communities, asking them to pray for this intention, also every Thursday. The significance of Thursday is that it was on Holy Thursday that Christ prayed for the unity of his followers. Spencer also tried to get the English hierarchy to back his plan, but they seemed less than enthusiastic. This opposition hardened in 1840, in the person of Bishop Baines of the Western District, who wrote a pastoral letter against the scheme.

There was already a dichotomy developing in the Catholic Church in England, which was to continue for several decades. There were the old recusant families and their dependents, who had been through severe persecution; there were also the mainly working class immigrants from Ireland, with totally different needs. As the century continued, a third strand emerged, of clerical converts, university men, with all the energies of an able middle class. When one adds to these the mainly Italian missionary orders, it is clear a certain amount of friction was bound to arise. Above all, however, these disparate strands of Catholicism were held together in defence of a religion still viewed with hostility by the vast majority of the population.

Spencer was a deep man of prayer and convinced that if everyone, including all Protestants and Anglicans, prayed for unity, it could be effected. He had an influential ally in Wiseman, then Rector of the English College at Rome, but soon to be Vicar Apostolic of the London District and subsequently Archbishop of Westminster, who set about creating a series of prayers for England.

This was not Spencer's way. He had noted, while in Paris, the existence of several prayer societies. There were the Association for the Propagation of the Faith, the Society of St Vincent de Paul to help the poor and the Archconfraternity of the Immaculate Heart of Mary for the conversion of sinners. These were the examples he wished to follow. He launched his prayer society at a dinner in West Bromwich, where he widened the intention, describing it in his speech,

'that we should undertake by united prayer to obtain from God the conversion of all the unfortunate people who, under the name of Christian, are separated from the fold of the one Shepherd, not confining ourselves only to Protestants...any more than confining the prayers to England, but including the Greeks and the Russians and the ancient sects of Asia'⁹.

He was encouraged by the public reaction, which was far from hostile, and particularly by Dr. Crolly, the Primate of Ireland, who promised to raise the matter at his next bishops' conference. This caused Spencer to write, 'It seems that Ireland is to be the first nation which will rise with one simultaneous impulse to gain from God the restoration of unity to Christendom, after which the Gospel will surely spread throughout the world. For what is there that stops its spread but the division and opposition of Christians'¹⁰.

Dr Baines soon launched a broadside against these plans. He was fearful they would be construed as papal aggression and create a backlash, undermining the recent progress made by Catholics. He argued such an association would be counter-productive. He was hostile not only to Spencer's initiative, but also to the ultramontanist and papalist converts that ran counter to the traditional ethos of English Catholicism that had developed over three hundred years in isolation far from the writ of Rome.

Shortly after this, Spencer left West Bromwich to work at the new seminary for the Midlands District at Oscott. No longer having parish duties gave him greater freedom and his new post gave him influence over future priests. He continued to spread his prayer campaign among religious orders in Ireland and on the Continent. He was aware of the results already being seen in a movement within Anglicanism at Oxford, led by Keble, Pusey and Newman. When he sought to meet the latter, Newman refused to dine with one whom he deemed an apostate but they met briefly. Spencer urged the Oxford men to pray for their Catholic brethren, saying that he was 'sure that if we felt the desirableness of unity and if we prayed for each other, where there was a will there would be a way'¹¹.

In 1842, Spencer travelled around Ireland, convinced that he had a totally new solution for the Irish question. If the deeply prayerful Irish prayed for the conversion of England, they might conquer their sister Island by prayer; both communities, being then united in religion, a diminution of social and political antagonism would then ensue. This simplistic solution illustrates yet again his child like trust in the power of prayer. He did not limit his appeal to the Irish and their pastors. He also spoke to Lord Clarendon, then Viceroy of India, to Lord Palmerston, the Foreign Secretary and even to the prime Minister, Lord John Russell.

All this effort brought on a recurrence of the heart palpitations that he had already experienced in 1835; accordingly, he was given leave to travel in Europe where he spent the greater part of 1844 touring the religious houses and clerical councils, promoting his prayer society.

In October 1845, Newman was received into the Catholic Church by Dominic Barbieri. It seemed a harbinger of a possible mass migration of the whole high Church movement. As we know, it brought many other conversions, but not the effect desired by Fr. Spencer.

He had long been considering leaving the secular priesthood for the regular. He had wished this from his time in Rome, but he had been persuaded to remain a secular priest, not least, one suspects, so that he could still receive and use his not inconsiderable wealth for the good of the poor and the Church. In his personal life, he had tried to follow a pattern of life as close as possible to those who had made stricter vows. He finally decided to join the Passionists at Aston in Staffordshire. He joined four poor Italians who had been there for a few years, the most notable of whom was Dominic Barbieri, who had received Newman and who now clothed the new Fr. Ignatius.

Beside his work for Christian Unity, Spencer also wished to travel the land winning souls for Christ and the Church. he felt that, as a Passionist, he could devote himself entirely to this. There was, however, the extra burden of obedience, and, although he was given some leeway, he was completely under the jurisdiction of his superiors

and the even greater tyranny of poverty. Henceforward he was often begging not only for prayers but also for alms, as the order in England had virtually no resources.

So, he tramped round England in his habit, and made a point of calling on Protestants to ask all, in his words, 'to pray for unity in the truth, wherever God knows it to be'¹². In 1851, he made the second of four visits to Ireland, during which he made his famous appeal for a 'Hail Mary' a day for the conversion of England. Of course, for Spencer, prayers for England's conversion and for church unity were synonymous. He explained, 'I go to visit all the Anglican clergymen I can, and, if it pleases God, I go to visit all their bishops and insist that all, especially the poor, should be moved and encouraged to pray every day that the Lord would lead this kingdom out of its divisions to unity in Faith, and what does this mean if not Catholicism?'¹³

In 1849, he contacted William Dodsworth, an Anglican clergyman who had published a sermon entitled, 'A call to pray for unity in the truth addressed to everyone who nameth the name of Christ'. In it Dodsworth reiterated that unity is only addressed by humility and prayer. Lack of unity is a sin. We should feel guilty for it and strive for amendment. So, the suggestion was that Anglicans should offer a daily Our Father for unity while their catholic friends offered a 'Hail Mary'. It is strange that a further degree of unity should not have been signified by calling upon both traditions to say a common 'Our Father' for this intention. Perhaps the Anglicans thought that Catholics did not say the Lord's Prayer.

Fine though this spirit of co-operation appears, it was his links with non-Catholics that finally caused Rome to clip the wings of or ecumenical pioneer. Whilst the Passionist superiors and other ecclesiastic authorities were happy with the prayers for the conversion of England, they could not countenance any common services with those outside the fold. Nor was this the only source of discouragement. Spencer found the English Catholics almost indifferent to the intention of unity. They would taunt him with, 'Well, Sir, and is England Catholic yet?'¹⁴ However, he continued in the cause of unity, going, as usual, right to the top. He had at least four meetings with Pius IX on the subject in Rome in 1851. The outcome of these is seen in the answer to Lord Clifford by Fr. Testa, already cited in this paper.

The following year saw Fr. Spencer at Oscott for the synod now famous as the occasion of Newman's sermon, 'The Second Spring'. There, he joined the latter and Manning in composing a Latin prayer for the conversion of England which was approved by the assembled bishops.

In November 1852, he formally launched his prayer association, getting a great many people to sign up to it. He modelled it to some extent on the French sodalities and also on Fr. Matthew's temperance league. There was a daily prayer, a ribbon and a medal. Members were to be checked by their parish priest. At its maximum membership, it was four thousand members strong. The aim was confined to the conversion of England, the formularies of the Church having narrowed his totally ecumenical approach. Since becoming a Passionist, and subsequent to the death of Fr. Barbieri, the superior in England, Spencer had many other missions, including fund raising to accomplish.

Throughout the 1850's he toured both Britain and Ireland in the cause of Christian Unity. However, he refused, in 1863, to join the Association for the Promotion of the Unity of Christendom (APUC), which had been founded in 1857 by a group of Anglicans, led by Dr. F.G. Lee, together with some Catholics, including Spencer's old friend, Ambrose Phillips. The only requirement for lay people was to pray the prayer for unity and the Lord's Prayer. Priests additionally had to celebrate the eucharist once a quarter for the unity of Christians.

While Fr. Ignatius was encouraged by the formation of this group, which was anxious for his approval as the initiator of prayer for unity, he gave his reasons for refusing to join. Their declared objective was the reunion of the Greek, Roman and Anglican Branches of the catholic Church. Ignatius reminded them, 'A corporate reunion of the English or of the Greek church would be a most blessed result. Such unions have before now been effected with regard to the latter by negotiations carried on by its rulers, and so they may again'¹⁵. However, he could not countenance any organisation which wished unity at the expense of the unique claims of the Roman Church.

This was the last restating of his position on Christian unity. He could hardly have put more clearly his life's wish that all his fellow countrymen might one day enjoy the freedom of conviction which he had experienced since 1830. Even in his last retreat, given to the Poor Clares of Darlington, he spoke of his hope that the great goal of conversion might soon be achieved.

He died of heart failure on the drive of Mr Monteith, at Carstairs in Lanarkshire on 1 October 1864, during yet another missionary journey. He believed that if all Christians prayed sincerely for the unity of the Body of Christ, in accordance with the will of the Father, it would be speedily accomplished. He may well be right, and the fact that we continue divided, though far more co-operative than in Spencer's day, serves to illustrate that for so many of us the sin of disunity is not the burning issue that it was for him. Perhaps it should be!

Notes

¹ J.G. Le Sage ten Broek. Extract from the letter of George Spencer in *Katholieke Nederlandsche Stemmen*, 6 (1840), 232.

² Jozef van den Bussche, CP. *Ignatius (George) Spencer, Passionist (1799-1864)*. Leuven UP, 1991, p. 162.

³ General Archives of the Sisters of the Cross and Passion, Great Billing. Cited in Bussche, op cit, p. 157.

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ Pius A. Sp Sancto, *Life of Fr Ignatius*, Dublin, 1866, p. 20.

⁷ Bussche, op cit, p. 22.

⁸ *The Catholic Standard*, 10. Dec. 1853, p.6.

⁹ Bussche op cit, p. 46.

¹⁰ Ibid, p. 47.

¹¹ Newman J.H. *Correspondence of J.H. Newman, 1839-1845*, London, 1917, pp. 51-52.

¹² Pius A. Sp. Sancto, op cit, p. 389.

¹³ Bussche, op cit, p. 150.

¹⁴ Ibid, p. 160.

¹⁵ Bussche, op cit, p. 236.