

THE SOCIETY FOR ECUMENICAL STUDIES

***The Groupe des Dombes : A Dialogue of Conversion* (Catherine E. Clifford, Peter Lang 2005)**

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Despite its high price, this book will be a must for any serious theological library and, indeed, for any ecumenist engaged in theological dialogue. It tells the story of the unofficial but highly influential French dialogue group which, today, consists of twenty Catholic priests and twenty Protestant pastors.

Catherine Clifford, who teaches theology at St Paul University, Ottawa, writes with great clarity. Her argument is tight but never confusing. She uses insights from a fellow-Canadian, the late Bernard Lonergan, to assist her analysis of the development and achievement of the Groupe.

The idea of the Groupe was the brainchild of that father of modern spiritual ecumenism, Paul Couturier. Clifford argues that “the failure of recent historians of the Ecumenical Movement to recognise his instrumental role in the inauguration of twentieth century ecumenical dialogue reflects a lack of appreciation for the holistic character of his vision”. She relates the relationship of this vision to the unfolding work of the Groupe, thus giving us the best short account of Couturier's significance yet to appear in English.

Professor Clifford also offers a very useful survey of the recent comprehensive study of issues in Marian theology and devotion, “Mary in the plan of God and the communion of saints”.(1) She notes that this is by far the most thorough treatment of the subject produced by any dialogue (We may note, *en passant*, that it is far more detailed than the recent ARCIC report, or the earlier British Catholic-Methodist and American Lutheran-Catholic studies). She appraises the document as “sober and rigorous with a deliberately meditative quality that engages the reader in a re-appreciation of the Gospel heritage concerning

Mary'. She shows the use of the Catholic-Lutheran consensus on justification and grace as a lens through which traditions concerning Mary can be re-read.

Clifford notes the pastoral concern of the Groupe lest aspects of the current revival of Marian piety in the Roman Catholic Church take forms that create new sources of ecumenical tension and division. The report calls upon Catholics to drop the term "Mariology" and seek the re-integration of all Marian thought into Christology. The Catholic members of the Groupe avow that a number of Catholic theologians have made statements about co-redemption and co-mediation that are "objectively inaccurate" (2). The Groupe remind the Catholic Church of Alexander VII's command that the proponents of and opponents of the doctrine of the Immaculate Conception should not anathematise each other; and they ask that the dogmas of the Assumption and Immaculate Conception should not be imposed as conditions of restored communion. At the same time, Protestants are chided for their neglect of Mary and are invited to recover the significance of the scripturally attested Marian feasts.

Clifford's treatment of Marian theology and devotion reflects the care with which the author explores all the other themes of the Groupe's dialogues in this important and commendable study.

1. *The original French title is Marie dans le dessein de Dieu et la communion des saints.*
2. *My translation of "objectivement fautive".*