

# Factor in the Thaw between Churches

This article is written as a conversation between Father Frederick Black of St. John Fisher College and Rev. David MacLennan, now a pastor in Florida and former pastor of Brick Presbyterian Church, Rochester.

Dr. MacLennan: One of the great new facts of our time is the thaw in the once-frigid relationships between Protestants and Roman Catholics and the Eastern Orthodox. Since the 16th Century Protestant Reformation too many of us have acted like "God's Frozen People." Now we are in the warm Christian climate of true ecumenism.

Father Black: One happy result of the thaw is that both Catholics and Protestants have made a lot of new friends. But more can be said than that — after all, especially here in America, there were Catholic and Protestant friendships long before ecumenism.

What is new to most Catholics is a realization that not just individual Protestants can be good and holy people, but that their congregations and their churches are holy. I can give an example from my own childhood. We always felt that our Baptist next-door neighbors were very good people, better than we were. (They were good to us, too. They had a T.V. set before we did, and our family used to go to their house to see Bishop Sheen.) Yet I never in my life set foot inside their church (and I doubt if they ever entered ours).

We could see how Protestants could be holy individually, but we felt that their churches represented all that was wrong about heresy. The trouble with that attitude was that it placed too low a value on Christian fellowship. We ought to have remembered from the Gospel that Christ promised that He would be present in any gathering in His name. Certainly one of the great rewards of the ecumenical movement is the joy of gathering together as Christians.

Dr. MacLennan: Father Black

## Seminary... Picks Advisers

Saginaw, Mich.—(NC)—Eight laymen, two priests and two nuns have been named to the first advisory board for St. Paul Seminary here.

Members were drawn from parents of students, from Catholic and public school educators, lay groups interested in vocations and business and communications fields.

expresses my sentiments. I, too, was fortunate enough to spend the early years of my life with loyal Roman Catholics and a noble Jewish family for neighbors. But "none of us entered church or synagogue supported by the others."

I will always be grateful for the Christian insight of the Irish mother of my Roman Catholic schoolmate and neighbor. In her old age I called on her. I was then recently ordained as a minister. We talked of my father who had died some years previously. She praised his character and faith and I said, "He was a Christian." She corrected me by saying "He is a Christian." She was sure he lived in the Church Invisible and Triumphant.

With the growth of ecumenism increasing numbers of us—within the Roman Catholic Church and the branches of the Protestant Church—have discovered how much we have in common as Christians. Of course, this does not mean there are not differences in our beliefs as in the structures of the institutions. Organic reunion may be a long time coming.

Meanwhile, we can sing sincerely as did Anna in the musical "The King and I" — "getting to know you", and the knowledge deepens our friendship as persons and as communities of the Great Church.

Father Black: One thing that some people half expected has not (to my mind) taken place. Many Catholics thought, some 30 or 40 years ago, that the only way of getting together that would be acceptable to Protestants would be to put less emphasis on differences, to water down the doctrines that divide us, and in various ways to compromise traditional beliefs.

This feeling was the chief reason why Catholics stayed out of the ecumenical movement for so long. Now that so much ecumenical activity has taken place, I really do not think that there has been any watering down on either side. The dialogue leads one to examine more closely what previously might have been taken for granted, but since, after all, our purpose is to do what God wants, not what we want, we are not really inclined to tamper with what we believe comes from God in order to get along better with our neighbor. What we have discovered is that we can differ about a number of things while we are still firmly united on certain essentials of Christianity, and that we can better appreciate these essentials together than apart.

Dr. MacLennan: I could not agree more. Indeed, to attempt reconciliation and to build

friendship by reducing our respective beliefs to an irreducible minimum is unfair and unworkable. Ralph Waldo Emerson, I believe, warned against trying to build unity on what he called "a mush of concessions." Our foundation is Jesus Christ. As we study and talk and pray together, understanding of this divine foundation will become clearer.

It is more than an epigram to hold that as we draw nearer to our Lord we shall draw nearer to each other without any dilution of our convictions or any minimizing of differences. It is true that what we believe may divide us, while Whom we believe unites us as brothers and sisters in Him.

Father Black: Both of us have asked each other, "Are there any bad effects of ecumenism?" It is my thought that it would be too bad if the ecumenical movement made those who were involved in it too satisfied with themselves, and this is always a temptation. In a way this would be falling into the sin that has for so long kept us apart.

There is need for an inner conversion of the heart without which not only ecumenical activity but any Christian life at all, cannot survive, and this inward conversion does not fit very well with a feeling of satisfaction that we have stopped fighting with each other. Nor can Christians take much satisfaction out of the limited way in which (either together or apart) they are fulfilling the charge put upon them by our Saviour to spread His message to the whole world.

Dr. MacLennan: Self-satisfaction is surely a sin, which who believe sincerely in ecumenism, are susceptible. What can save us from falling into this sin is surely (1) awareness of the danger of complacency and (2) keeping always open to the conversion of the heart of which Father Black speaks. (3) A third saving factor is our Saviour's command to capture for Christ this world, which a contemporary described as a lost province of the Kingdom of God.

When we join in whatever combined operations we can without being disloyal to our own Church, we shall find our common concern to do God's will in our world a strong defense against self-satisfaction, pride and smugness. After all, Christians are a minority on this earth, although a spiritually powerful minority. There is no "cease fire" in the spiritual and moral warfare to which we are committed.

Father Black: A great many of the books written by Catho-

lics and Protestants about each other in the past have been devoted to apologetics or polemics. This literature was not really directed to the other side; it usually aimed to strengthen the convictions of those who were already convinced. Perhaps this defensive point of view was necessary to those who held it, but in any case it has been a great relief to get away from this spirit of not very profitable argument to an atmosphere where we can really learn something from men of piety and scholarship in other traditions than our own.

Catholics have been helped a great deal, for example, by Protestant scholarship on the Holy Scriptures. Even in doctrinal theology where Catholics are careful to preserve tradition, the dialogue with Protestant theology has shown us the value and even the necessity, in order to really speak the truth, of using the language, the philosophy, and the critical spirit of the modern world.

Dr. MacLennan: Always I will remember the answer given by a Jesuit scholar and professor at Woodstock College to our Presbytery of Genesee Valley. He delivered a most enlightening address on the great second Vatican Council called by that beloved apostle of ecumenism, the late Pope John XXIII, and continued by his able successor

Pope Paul VI. Said the Jesuit to a large congregation of Roman Catholic priests and Protestant pastors: "You may not think it much, but it means a great deal to us, that since Vatican II we are no longer nervous with you! Before we thought of you as heretics, persons for whose conversion we should pray and work. Now we know that you, too, are Christ's and therefore our brothers. We are relaxed with you, as we hope you are with us. We can learn from each other and we are learning."

Our Woodstock College professor was correct. For these benefits we give our blessed Lord the praise. For it is by His grace and Holy Spirit that we are in dialogue and discovering the treasures of each other's tradition, scholarship, and living faith.

God has given us more than tolerance of each other. He gives deep appreciation and a growing affection which nothing must diminish or destroy. Father Black: We have not discussed the new appreciation of the meaning of tradition by many Protestants, nor the liturgical renewal in both the Roman Catholic Church and many Protestant Churches. These are both promising developments.

Dr. MacLennan: Indeed, these are promising and while they might disturb some clergy and laity (it is human to be uneasy when the familiar patterns and language are changed) it is making our worship more meaningful and we pray a worthier of-

fering of our adoration and praise to God. Indeed, the use of the vernacular (in our nation this is English) in the Mass, hymns, and the stronger emphasis by our Roman Catholic brothers on biblical preaching is exciting to us Protestants. As one Protestant Church teacher observed, "We may be passing each other! The Roman Catholicism — life without God — nor-

positions some of us Protestants have been leaving — in worship — and vice versa!"

What or who is responsible for this convergence — this drawing together — in so many significant ways? Not alone the threat of a pervasive secularism — life without God — nor-

yet the tremendous impact of the spirit and actions of Pope John XXIII. We are convinced it is the Holy Spirit using human instruments and the total world situation. We thank God and take courage.

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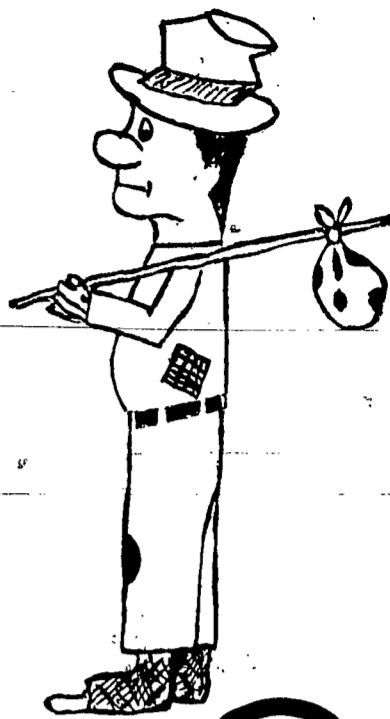
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## Two Bishops at Same Rite

Savannah — (RNS) — Both wearing full religious vestments, Episcopal Bishop Albert R. Stuart of Georgia (front center), and Catholic Bishop Thomas J. McDonough of Savannah march in procession at a Mass in the Cathedral of St. John the Baptist. The Mass mixed the Catholic diocese's interreligious Congress on Unity and Worship, attended by many Protestant, Catholic, Orthodox and Jewish clergymen. Scores of other clergy also attended. Discussed at the congress, besides the over-all question of Christian unity, were the meaning and value of Catholic liturgy and the nature of sacred music.

