

Historical Profile: Founder of the Octave of Prayer for Christian Unity

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An Episcopalian in the footsteps of Francis

On Sunday, 9 July 1893, the Reverend Lewis T. Watson, rector of St. John's Episcopal Church in Kingston, New York, opened his King James Bible for a special purpose. He hoped to find within its pages a name for the Religious Community that he strongly felt God was calling him to found. The thought of founding a Religious Community preoccupied his mind from boyhood.

One day, his father, the Rev. Joseph Newton Watson, recounted to him the following incident: "I was present once," said the elder Watson, "in the Roman Catholic Cathedral of Baltimore, when Walworth, as a Paulist Father, addressed a vast concourse of men who packed the building to the doors. You see, Walworth and I were students together at the General Theological Seminary.... What we need in the Episcopal Church is a preaching Order like the Paulists".

Suddenly, the 10-year-old boy heard an interior voice saying: "That is what you will do some day, found a preaching Order like the Paulists".

On that July Sunday 1893, Fr. Watson found himself reading chapter five, verse 11 of St. Paul's Letter to the Romans: "And not only so, but we also find joy in God through Our Lord Jesus Christ, by whom we have now received the atonement".

"Atonement", here is the name that he would give to his Community, a name that was linked to Christ's Passover to the Father. Years later he would write to Mother Lurana, Foundress of the Franciscan Sisters of the Atonement: "The moment my eyes rested upon the word 'Atonement' it seemed to stand out from that sacred page with a distinctness all its own and it flashed upon me, as I believe from Heaven, that the Community God was preparing was to be called the Society of the Atonement".

Divided into syllables the word read: "at-one-ment". The new Society, to be founded in the Episcopalian Church, would be committed to the ministry of "at-one-ment", that is, prayer and work for the reconciliation of Christians and their churches, making them at-one, thereby reflecting the gift of unity given by Christ to his Church in the power of the Holy Spirit.

Such was Fr. Watson's mind in 1893, a time when ecumenical concerns were far from vital in the life and witness of most Christian churches.

Almost seven years would pass between Fr. Watson's finding of the atonement text in Paul's Letter to the Romans and the foundation of the Society. And in God's providence it would be a woman's devout inquiry that would serve as the catalyst for the actual foundation of the Community.

The woman was Miss Lurana White, a novice of the Episcopal Sisters of the Holy Child Jesus in Albany, New York. In the Spring of 1897, she wrote a letter to Fr. Watson, who was then Superior of a group of Episcopalian priests in Omaha, Nebraska. Her choice of Watson arose, not because she knew him personally, but because she had heard that he was, in her own words, "very high church and had stood tenaciously for his ritualistic practices and Catholic teaching when Rector of St. John's Church, Kingston, New York".

In her letter Miss White described her very strong desire to enter a Religious Community whose members publicly professed the vow of poverty and lived according to the Franciscan spirit.

Her inquiry of Fr. Watson was simple: Did he know of any Religious Community within the Episcopalian Church whose Rule required the public profession of the vow of poverty?

In his response of 31 May 1897, Fr. Watson stated: "I am sorry that I cannot give a satisfactory answer to your question. I am not sufficiently acquainted with the Rule of the several Sisterhoods in the Church to tell you whether any of them practice strict corporate poverty. If there be such I am not aware of it. Yet I have no doubt that a goodly percentage of them have no endowment and live practically by faith".

White's inquiry and Watson's response marked the beginning of a long correspondence by means of which each shared what they believed was placed in their hearts by divine inspiration. Letter after letter provided the forum in which Fr. Watson told of his dream to found a Religious Community called the Society of the Atonement, dedicated to Christian unity and mission.

Beginning like St. Francis

It was in October 1898, that Rev. Lewis Watson and Lurana White met face-to-face for the first time. The meeting place was the White family home located in Warwick, New York.

On 7 October, at the conclusion of a three-day retreat, Fr. Watson and Lurana White made a "covenant" with God and one another to found the Society of the Atonement. Each gave to the other a Crucifix which in Lurana's words, "represented the entire oblation of ourselves into the hands of God for the purpose of founding the Society of the Atonement".

But where to begin? Should the new Community be founded in the Far West, the Mid West, or in one of the big cities of the East?

Lurana suggested a site not too far from the small town of Garrison, New York, where friends had told her there was a "little abandoned church".

If Francis of Assisi had begun his vocation after hearing the words, "Now go hence, Francis, and build up my church, for it is nearly falling down", how fitting that the new Society began its foundation near St. John's-in-the-Wilderness, the little abandoned church situated in an area called Graymoor. And so it happened.

On 15 December 1898, Lurana White took up residence near the church in a poor, windswept and dilapidated farmhouse called the Diamond House. The date of 15 December is now celebrated by the Sisters and Friars of the Atonement as Foundation Day.

Late the following year, after completing some 10 months of training for the Religious life with the Episcopal Order of the Holy Cross, Fr. Watson also went to Graymoor where he lived in an old paint shack which he called his "Palace of Lady Poverty".

Fr. Watson made his profession of vows and took the name Paul. White also took vows but retained her birth name, Lurana. They now set about the task of reflecting upon and clarifying the purpose of their new Society. Clearly their vocation to church unity was founded on Jesus' prayer: "That all may be one".

But this conviction would be shaped in a special way by both their understanding of Church and by their pro-Roman beliefs.

For Fr. Paul and Mother Lurana, the one Church of Christ was constituted of the Church of Rome, the Anglican Communion and the Orthodox Church. Each was truly Church and while each branch was a manifestation of Christ's one Church, both the Anglican Communion and the Orthodox Church had suffered because of their break with the See of Rome.

Indeed, for Fr. Paul and Mother Lurana the Roman See was the divinely established centre of Church unity.

But dominating their prayer and thoughts was their own beloved Anglican Communion. Christ's gift of unity would be rendered much more visible if the Anglican Church would reunite as a body with the Church of Rome.

More and more, this concern for the corporate reunion of the Anglican Communion with Rome occupied the prayer and energies of the new Founders.

There were other Episcopalians, both in the United States and abroad, who shared this pro-Roman view. But should a Franciscan community, newly founded in the Episcopal Church, become the voice for proclaiming that there could be no real Church unity except that which was centred around the Chair of Peter?

In early October 1900, Mother Lurana forcefully expressed to Fr. Paul the hazards of such an enterprise: "Do you realize to what persecutions, ostracism and peril of annihilation you will be exposing the Society of the Atonement by undertaking such a propaganda?".

But true to what she had called the "one-ness of God's call", she made her own Fr. Paul's response, "Yes, I think I do. Nevertheless if our witness is from God, sooner or later it will prevail, though the whole world is against us".

And so in a sermon preached at Graymoor on 28 October 1900, Fr. Paul contended that the faith, once and for all delivered to the saints, was none other than the faith of the Holy Roman Catholic Church. Much to the surprise of the small congregation that day, he likewise affirmed that the Chair of Peter was the divinely constituted centre of a reunited Christendom.

Counter-cultural unity

Other "Roman beliefs" that rested easy with both Founders were the doctrines of Papal infallibility, the *de jure divino* universal jurisdiction of Peter's Successor and the Immaculate Conception of Mary.

On the other hand, both Fr. Paul and Mother Lurana were convinced that the 1896 teaching of Pope Leo XIII, contained in *Apostolicae Curvae*, regarding the validity of Anglican orders was not irrevocable and would in fact be changed as new theological and historical data came to light.

It was their enthusiastic promotion of Roman beliefs, intertwined with an exaltation of the Papacy as the Centre of Church unity, that brought many of their fellow Episcopalians, clergy and lay, to look with suspicion upon this new religious Community.

Gradually, more and more pulpits within the Episcopalian Church were closed to Fr. Paul. Donations, much needed by the fledgling Community, dwindled to almost nothing. The sentiments surfacing ever more forcibly against the new Founders were expressed most clearly in the closing lines of an editorial of the Living Church, 5 October 1901, a publication held in high esteem by many Episcopalians: "The whole Anglican communion is unanimous in repudiating absolutely the doctrine of Papal Supremacy, which the earnest but erratic priest of Graymoor has preached".

In an attempt to find an audience who would listen to his message of Christian unity, Fr. Paul, in collaboration with Mother Lurana, began a monthly magazine called *The Lamp*. At the insistence of Mother Lurana, the top of each page bore the inscription, "*Ut Omnes Unum Sint*" (That all may be one).

In the first issue of February 1903, Fr. Paul stated the purpose of the new magazine as follows: "Candlemas... marks the first appearance of *The Lamp*. We have lighted it as witness to the Old Faith as taught by the English Church before a wicked King severed her from the Centre of unity.

"We believe that not only does our Blessed Lord wish us to pray, but to work for unity; and instead of magnifying differences between ourselves and Rome, we ought to minimize them and thus prepare the way for the peace which we all long for as Christians".

Now that pulpits were closed to him, Fr. Paul had in *The Lamp* a new medium, but his message remained basically the same. And it was a message shared by other pro-Romans within the Anglican Communion during the opening years of the 20th century.

The pages of *The Lamp* in those early years unfolded this message, constantly addressing the issue of the corporate reunion of the Anglican Communion with Rome, upholding the Roman teaching on the Pope as Successor to Peter, maintaining the validity of Anglican Orders and tirelessly pointing to the Chair of Peter as the visible centre of Church unity.

In the minds of most readers of *The Lamp*, the Co-Founders of the Society of the Atonement were definitely heading in the direction of Rome.

Yet between late 1900, when both publicly proclaimed that Church unity was impossible without reunion with the See of Rome, until the year 1907, neither felt personally driven to seek entrance into the Roman Church.

Their common mind was that corporate reunion with Rome was the goal, the *desideratum*, even if the "corpus" was only constituted of a remnant of "Anglo-Catholics" or "Pro-Roman" members within the Anglican Communion.

In the April 1903 issue of *The Lamp* Fr. Paul expressed it in this way: "But when those who have fallen away from Catholic unity return to the sheepfold of Peter, they will return as a body. They went out as a body and they will return as a body".

This firm conviction concerning corporate reunion was considerably weakened in October of 1907, when the General Convention of the Episcopal Church voted to allow ministers, not ordained in their Church, to occasionally preach from pulpits of Episcopalian Churches. Such preaching required the permission of the Congregation's Rector or, in his absence, the permission of the Bishop.

Referred to as the Open Pulpit Canon, it called into question in the minds of both Fr. Paul and Mother Lurana their lifelong belief that the Anglican Communion was, as a body, a distinct branch of the one true Church of Christ.

Now it seemed that the uniqueness as well as the ecclesial equality of the Anglican Communion with the Roman and the Orthodox Churches were being abandoned in and through the General Convention's decision to allow ministers from other churches to preach from the pulpits of the Episcopal Church.

No corporate welcome yet

Should they not make overtures to Catholic authorities and see if they and their small Community might not be received corporately into the Church of Rome?

Mother Lurana took the initiative by obtaining a meeting with Archbishop John Farley of New York on 21 November 1907. Her comment concerning that meeting was: "I found him a conservative of conservatives". The future Cardinal offered little encouragement relative to the corporate reception of the Society of the Atonement into the Catholic Church. There simply was no precedent for this kind of reception.

But there was ample precedent for individuals coming from this or that Protestant Church and embracing the fullness of the Catholic faith. And so Mother Lurana was left with the impression that she was welcome to enter the Catholic Church and live as a vowed Religious by seeking admission into one of the many Sisterhood Communities already existing within that Church.

The same would logically apply in the case of Fr. Paul. He could seek admission into the Jesuits or Redemptorists or Passionists or Franciscans, stable Communities that had already given ample proof of holiness and Gospel witness within the Catholic Church.

As far as the Archbishop was concerned, individual entrance into the Catholic Church on the part of Fr. Paul, Mother Lurana and their few followers was absolutely necessary. He was not in favour of the reception of the Society as such and its continuation in the Catholic Church as a distinct Religious Community.

For his part Fr. Paul, while dismayed by the passage of the Open Pulpit Canon, continued to work within the Episcopal Church for the goal of Christian unity as he understood it.

In 1907, he co-authored with an English pro-Roman advocate, the Rev. Spencer Jones, a book called *The Prince of the Apostles*. Mother Lurana wrote the first chapter and edited the other chapters. Again the See of Peter was singled out as the visible centre of Christian unity.

Fr. Vincent McNabb, a well-known English Dominican, pointed this out in his review of the book: "The most important fact is not what is said but who have said it ... and if we may be allowed the phrase, we find the title page the weightiest page in the book".

It was likewise within the 1907 passage of the Open Pulpit Canon and the entrance of the Society into the Catholic Church in 1909, that Fr. Paul began what would be one of his most enduring apostolates, the Church Unity Octave.

His English friend, Spencer Jones, suggested that there be an annual one day of prayer and preaching on the office of the Papacy. He mentioned that 29 June, the Feast of St. Peter, would be a very appropriate day for this devotion.

Replying to Rev. Jones on 30 November 1907, Fr. Paul wrote: "The 'Peter sermon' suggestion is fine.... In addition to that, what do you think of inaugurating a Church unity week beginning with St. Peter's Chair at Rome, 18 January, and ending with St. Paul's Day?".

Without waiting for an answer from Jones, Fr. Paul began writing letters to clergy and friends of Graymoor, both Roman and Episcopal, asking them to participate in the Octave of Prayer for Unity. Over 2,000 persons agreed to do so in this first observance.

At the end of a report in *The Lamp* concerning Franciscan Friars and Sisters of 1908 observance, Paul expressed the hope that "this Church unity observance so auspiciously begun, may be kept with increasing numbers year after year until our Lord's prayer, *Ut omnes unum sint*, is completely fulfilled".

Little did Fr. Paul and Mother Lurana dream that Week of Prayer for Christian Unity would one day be observed almost universally by the major Christian Churches.

The definitive choice

In the pages of *The Lamp*, in countless letters and in private conversations, Fr. Paul had tenaciously held to the twofold witness of the Primacy of the Holy and the Validity of Anglican Orders. Throughout early 1900s many were the voices that spoke to him concerning the inconsistency of this position.

For example, Fr. Paul himself cites two such witnesses in the June 1903 issue of *The Lamp*: "A distinguished Jesuit Father in the Sacred Heart Messenger exclaims: 'How any one can pretend to obey the Pope and remain an Anglican is more than we can understand'".

And from the pen of an Episcopal clergyman: "Your position is absolutely untenable". It is neither Anglican or Roman, and I am positive, therefore, that it cannot be Catholic".

But it was only in 1909 that Fr. Paul and Mother Lurana came to see that their position was "absolutely untenable". In May of that year, Bishop Frederick Joseph Kinsman of Delaware, who had recently become the Episcopal Visitor for the Society of Atonement, met with Fr. Paul so that he could hear first hand about the Society's allegiance to both the Roman Catholic Church and the Anglican Communion.

Two months later, in a letter addressed to Fr. Paul and dated 5 July 1909, Bishop Kinsman provided the final stimulus that moved Fr. Paul and Mother Lurana to seek entrance into the Catholic Church.

In that momentous letter, after describing most accurately the tenets embraced by the Co-founders, Bishop Kinsman wrote: "My advice is that, in the interest of single-minded honesty and devotion to duty, you make the choice between the two Churches.

"You cannot serve either the Papal Church or the Protestant Episcopal Church well if you try to serve both at the same time. Either give up belief in a divinely established Papacy and in Roman dogmas as the one complete expression of the Christian faith, as one must do to be a consistent and contented Anglican, or else give up Anglican Orders, make an unqualified submission to the Latin Church and be a good Roman Catholic.

"I have no hesitation in saying that if I were in your position I should choose the latter alternative".

On 30 October 1909, the Society of the Atonement acted upon the advice given by the Episcopal Bishop of Delaware. On that day, Fr. Paul and Mother Lurana, along with another Friar, two Atonement Sisters, two novices and 10 lay associates, made their unqualified submission to the Latin Church.

Their profession of faith was received by Mons. Joseph Controy, Vicar General of the Diocese of Ogdensburg, who was the personal representative of Archbishop John Farley.

Due to the influence of Cardinal Merry del Val, who was a faithful reader of *The Lamp* and Secretary of State under Pius X, the Holy See was quite gracious in its reception of the small Community. It was accepted as a distinct Religious Community, allowed to keep its name and encouraged to keep as its purpose prayer and work for Christian unity and mission.

The corporate reception of the Friars and Sisters of the Atonement into the Roman Church was the first such occurrence since the Reformation.

Many of the ministries which had already begun when the Society was in the Episcopal Church continued to grow as it adapted itself to life within the Roman Church. *The Lamp* continued to highlight the message of Christian unity, winning more and more people to its readership.

The Union "That Nothing Be Lost", an organization which provided money for needy missionaries, grew larger and sensitized many to the apostolic labours of those men and women engaged in foreign and home missionary work.

St. Christopher's Inn, an expression of the Society's commitment to Franciscan ideals, continued to receive thousands of homeless men each year, providing them with hospitality in the spirit of St. Francis.

Among Roman Catholics, the Church Unity Octave, later known as the Week of Prayer for Christian Unity, was vigorously promoted every year from 18-25 January.

"We can pass through the door of ecumenism only on our knees". This is a sentence that Yves Congar repeated often on his course on ecumenism. It is a programme that has a long history. One may even say that it began with Jesus on the night before his death when he prayed "that they all may be one" (Jn 17:21). From that moment onward, he entrusted to his followers the prayer for unity of those who believed in him.

We know all too well the painful trajectory of history that Christians have followed in 2,000 years. It is only in modern times that Christians began to pray together among communities that are not in communion with each other.

Gradually, the Spirit has matured us in time. The Second Vatican Council has restored an ecclesiology of communion that has enabled the Catholic Church to enter in the one ecumenical movement—a movement that has spiritual ecumenism as its basis where the primacy of Peter exists.

The Conciliar Decree *Unitatis Redintegratio*, when giving guidance about the exercise of ecumenism, places prayer for the unity of Christians at the centre, that is, at what is called the "soul" of the entire ecumenical movement.

Taken from:
L'Osservatore Romano
Weekly Edition in English
2 April 2008, page 9

L'Osservatore Romano is the newspaper of the Holy See.
The Weekly Edition in English is published for the US by:

The Cathedral Foundation
L'Osservatore Romano English Edition
320 Cathedral St.
Baltimore, MD 21201
Subscriptions: (410) 547-5315
Fax: (410) 332-1069
lormail@catholiceview.org

Provided Courtesy of:
Eternal Word Television Network
5817 Old Leeds Road
Ironton, AL 35210
www.ewtn.com