

Christopher Davenport - an Early Franciscan Ecumenist *Philippe Yates OFM*



Christopher Davenport was born into the religious maelstrom of England at the end of the sixteenth century. In 1616 he left England to study at the Catholic English College in Douai, in Northern France, which had become a centre of English Catholic life because William Allen and a number of Oxford dons fled there when it was clear that Elizabeth's policies would not allow Catholics to practice their religion in peace in England. They established a college that would be a Catholic mini-Oxford. A seminary was soon established in the town to send missionaries back to England and the Catholic mission to Elizabethan England was nurtured by many a priest and martyr from this seminary.

The English Franciscan province owed its survival to the efforts of one of the members of the province during its brief revival under Queen Mary. From the relative freedom of an English prison, probably in 1610, William Staney recruited John Gennings to the Order and passed on to him the ancient seal of the province. Gennings returned to Douai to recruit companions to continue the English Franciscan Province. Christopher Davenport was one of Gennings' more illustrious recruits to the friars and in 1617 Davenport left Douai, along with two companions, to undertake the novitiate at Ypres under the great Recollect reformer Peter Marchant.

After Ypres, Davenport went to Salamanca to study theology and in 1620 was ordained a priest. It was here that Davenport became established in his scholarship of Duns Scotus. After returning to the Netherlands in 1621 and a brief stay in Brussels, Davenport became the first professor of theology at the new college of St. Bonaventure at Douai, established by the English Franciscans to train the men who were flocking to the renewed province. Davenport remained at Douai until 1632, when he was sent on the mission in England. Here he served Queen Henrietta Maria, Charles I's French Catholic wife.

While in England Davenport wrote his "paraphrastic exposition" or commentary on the Thirty Nine Articles. These 39 articles of faith, distilled from Cranmer's original 42, had been promulgated by Queen Elizabeth I in 1563 (in Latin) and 1571 (in English) as the basis of the faith of the Church of England. As such, Davenport realised that any reconciliation between Catholics and Anglicans would need to address the meaning of these articles. While at either extreme, the Protestant Puritans and Catholic Jesuits would brook no compromise, moderates in both churches, the High Church Laudian

Anglicans and the Catholic secular clergy, searched for common ground. Davenport sought to give a theological response to the problem that appeared insurmountable in dividing these groups of moderates - the Thirty-Nine Articles. He published this in Lyons in 1634 as an appendix to a larger work on grace entitled *Deus, natura, gratia*.

Davenport presented his commentary as a literal understanding of the Articles. This freed him from either having to interpret them as they had been historically interpreted or seeking out their original meaning. He was concerned only with those articles that were problematical in their interpretation. On five Articles he made no commentary whatever, of a further nine he simply said: "there is no difficulty with this Article, for it is Catholic doctrine" and of nine more he referred to his main treatise on grace rather than comment here. This left sixteen articles formally explained in his treatise. Sadly there is no room in this piece to follow his arguments, which at times are, admittedly, somewhat contrived.

By reconciling these articles with Catholic faith, Davenport set out an agenda for unity between the Church of England and the Catholic Church. He realised that what he had attempted would be controversial - in his epilogue he wrote "You will esteem the bare words sometimes deserving of severe censure, but the hidden sense, which I have drawn out, you will rightly esteem not very dissonant from the truth, except where men choose to twist it in another way". The immediate effect of his work, however, was not positive. He was condemned by Jesuits and Puritans, that much was to be expected. But even moderates did not feel able to support him. Archbishop Laud claimed later he had told friends of Davenport that the arguments in the book would not be well received. The crypto-Catholic Lord Treasurer Lord Cottington told Cardinal Barberini that the book pleased no-one. There were calls for its condemnation in Rome. The hands of the Puritans were strengthened against the Laudians in the Church of England because, Puritans claimed, the Catholic nature of Laudian theology was exposed. The anti-Catholic English mob edged closer to the Puritan position and the book was cited in Parliament as manifesting the danger of the English Church being surrendered to Rome. The papal representative in England told Davenport in 1639 never to write a similar book again. Davenport's response was to ask for a list of the book's errors so that he could correct them but it appears no such list was forthcoming.

Thus Davenport's attempts to lay the ground for reconciliation did not have immediate effect. But his methodology was one that would bear fruit in the future - for instead of looking at the apparent meaning of the words of the Thirty-Nine Articles, he endeavoured to look beyond the words to the faith they were trying to express and concluded there was no conflict of substance between the Anglican and Catholic understanding of faith. This approach to ecumenism was to bear much richer fruit in the last century. Davenport would have recognised the sentiment behind the statement of the 1966 Malta Report that inaugurated the Anglican-Roman Catholic International Commission - ARCIC.

Divergences since the sixteenth century have arisen not so much from the substance of this inheritance as from our separate ways of receiving it. They derive from our experience of its value and power, from our interpretation of its meaning and authority, from our formulation of its content, from our theological elaboration of what it implies, and from our understanding of the manner in which the Church should keep and teach the Faith. Further study is needed to "distinguish between those differences which are merely apparent, and those which are real and require serious examination". The English Franciscan Davenport pioneered such studies, it is up to us to continue them. *f*

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