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Fernand Portal: A Pioneer of Today's Ecumenical Dialogue

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Background – Vocation

Fernand Portal was born in 1855 in Laroque in the foothills of the Cevennes, at the edge of the area known as Hérault; it was a Protestant district. His father, Pierre, was a shoemaker who had to work very hard, as the family was not well off. Pierre was literate, though, and had a sincere and solid Christian faith, and used to go on several local pilgrimages. Fernand's mother was Louise Lafabrie and his grandmother Rosa Albus, which was the origin later on of the pseudonym Fernand Albus with which he used to sign certain articles in periodicals. He had two brothers who died in childhood, and a sister Marie.

He was brought up in a Christian atmosphere and was sent as a pupil to his uncle Jean-François Portal, a parish priest. This, however, did not last long as his uncle advised that he be sent to the minor seminary in Beaucaire. Once again this was a temporary remedy, and the eventual solution was that he continued his education in the minor seminary in Montpellier. But Fernand did not want to be a priest. He wanted to join the army, a career which seemed more suited to his character; he was lively and loved activity. Around then, too, he began to show a questioning open-mindedness. For example, he unhesitatingly welcomed Leo XIII's encyclical inviting French Catholics to align themselves with the new Republic, which had previously been rendered suspect by Popes like Pius IX for example. Fernand Portal was interested in all the topics of his day; he was open to dialogue.

He did not, however, seem particularly interested in Protestantism, in spite of his coming from the Cevennes. Anyway, for Portal Protestants were a small group. (It must be made clear here that the Protestantism of the Cevennes was Calvinist or Reformed, still strongly affected by the revolt of the Camisards. The Protestants of the Cevennes are in no way to be confused with Alsatian Lutherans, for example!).

His schooling in Montpellier was to prove decisive for the emergence of his vocation to the priesthood. The Vincentians had been in the minor seminary since 1845, and their lifestyle was obviously the origin of his missionary vocation.

He wrote to his parents one day: “My tastes, my character, everything inclines me towards a religious congregation, and I had only one idea, I wanted to become a son of St Vincent de Paul.” What he did not tell them, though, was that he would have to become a seminarist in Paris, at 95, rue de Sèvres, far away from home. By this time he had only one aim: to head off to China as a missionary. This was totally in keeping with his taste for adventure, and with his mind, which was open to the world. He was totally committed to his plan to be a missionary, right up to his ordination to the priesthood.

At the end of the 19th century Fernand Portal was not exceptional in this. The French Church was going through a real renewal which was showing itself, among other things, in a huge surge of missionary activity, especially towards far off lands. The trauma of the French Revolution, which had marked French Catholics, was gradually easing. The Church was recovering self-confidence. Missionary congregations were an even better example of the new found confidence, and the example of the Chinese and Vietnamese martyrs was a powerful stimulant for plenty of missionary vocations. Here we need only mention the Vincentian martyrs of China or Abyssinia.

Father Portal, Vincentian

On his arrival in Paris Fernand Portal was received into the seminary on his birthday, 14 August 1874. He took his vows in 1876, received the tonsure, minor orders and sub-diaconate in 1878. He was ordained deacon in 1879 and priest in 1880. It would appear that his formation was absolutely typical. But in Paris he experienced problems, because clerical students were not favourably regarded by the people of Paris, stamped with a whole revolutionary tradition and still remembering the recent events at the time of the *Commune*.

Right up to his ordination Fernand Portal believed that he could set out for China as a missionary! But since 1878 his health had not been too good and his plans were suddenly up for re-examination. A new career was then put before him, professor in a major seminary. This was work very dear to the heart of St Vincent, and one into which Fernand Portal threw himself enthusiastically.

His first appointment was to Oran [in Algeria]¹ where he had to face up to the reality of himself. In 1881 health problems arose again and indicated that he needed to be in a warmer climate, such as Lisbon or the major seminary in Nice. In 1884 he was appointed to the seminary in Cahors, to teach dogmatic and moral theology.

In spite of his disappointment at not being able to go to China he accepted, as a son of St Vincent, that the good results of missions could not be sustained

¹Words in square brackets have been inserted by the translator.

unless the local priests were well formed in the seminary. All through his life Fr. Portal never missed an opportunity of stressing the importance of the formation of future priests as an eminently Vincentian work.

His new mission as a professor in a diocesan major seminary meant that he had to set about much reading in the area of moral and dogmatic theology. It should also be noted that illness had given him a taste for study. His great open-mindedness led him to discover many writings. He gradually began to sense the enormous importance of the history of theology. "My reading was in the direction of history, even from the theological point of view," he would say later on, in 1909. "Theology is merely a history of what God has revealed to the human race" (extract from a letter of 1887). Following this line he came across Newman's *Essay [on the Development of Christian Doctrine]*, and the work of the German [Johann Adam] Möhler, a German, on the unity of the Church. Following the tradition of the 17th century French School he began to read the actual works of the Church Fathers in order to learn about the gradual clarification of dogmas, and therefore the development of Christian doctrine over a period of time. He was also interested in the recent history of French Catholicism:

*I have always been particularly interested in the history of the French Church, whose special image attracted me. In recent times (the period before his meeting with Halifax) I have followed with close attention the biographies and studies concerning our 19th century Catholic movement. It was especially what I have read recently that led to an increase in my love for the Church; these works have again put before my eyes examples, the memory of which later on was not without influence on my behaviour in difficult situations (Quotation from the manuscript text of *The Union of the Churches*).*

Through such serious reading Portal moved away from a sort of fixation in theology. As well as that, new data from science and the research of certain university lecturers such as Alfred Loisy in no way shook his faith. But it must be stressed that Portal's initiative was at that time rather unusual for a professor of dogmatic and moral theology, who was supposed to do nothing more than merely comment on the textbooks! A professor of his sort was certainly going to surprise the students in Cahors seminary. Let us hear what one of them, Msgr. Jean Calvet, had to say:

The moral theology lectures were just so so, but they were interspersed, without our knowing exactly why, with reflections on the history of the sacraments and on newspaper reports of present-day religious affairs. This professor who, from a sense of duty did his work as professor, was possessed by an idea, lived an idea, which had its origin in himself and in

some of his friends. He used to dream of the union of the Christian Churches, and he worked for the re-union of the Christian Churches” (Jean Calvet: *Visages d’un demi-siècle*, p. 10).

The First Anglo-Roman Campaign 1889-1896

Portal’s ecumenical vocation began by chance when he happened to meet an Anglican, Lord Halifax. This was far from the upper echelons of university thought. Portal could have said, rather like St Vincent, “We did not think of it!”

The adventure began on the Island of Madeira where Halifax had gone in December 1889, bringing his son Charles who had contracted tuberculosis. At the same time Portal was acting as a replacement for one of the two chaplains, who were also patients, in Funchal hospice. But Portal’s illness was short and he was soon out of a job. One day he received a visit from Halifax who, like himself, had nothing to do; he was looking for someone to accompany him on his long walks around the island. For a long time he had been interested in the work of St Vincent and the Vincentian Family. They went on many walks together, always discussing religious affairs. Portal got the idea of trying to convert the Anglican, but a deep friendship, mixed with respect, began to form between the two men.

Before going any further, we should get to know Lord Halifax better. Under his family name, Charles Lindley Wood, [the second Viscount] Halifax was a close friend of the Prince of Wales. Family members had been in the government of the United Kingdom. His grandfather had been Prime Minister and his father Chancellor of the Exchequer. As early as 1868 he had wanted to devote himself to the service of the Church of England, in spite of a brilliant career as secretary to his cousin the Home Secretary.

In the Church of England his service was strongly linked to a trend known as the Oxford Movement. This was a group of Christians, lay and clerical, who were rediscovering, within the Church of England, the reality of the Church as an institution founded by Christ, and confirmed by the faith of the Fathers of the early centuries (the period of the undivided Church), and of the first seven ecumenical councils. At the same time these Christians had rediscovered the heritage of the Apostles through the unbroken succession of bishops; (the Anglican Church has always been episcopalian). The Oxford Movement included some famous theologians such as Newman (before his conversion to Roman Catholicism), Keble and Pusey.

The ideas of the Oxford Movement also had a more popular form known as the Ritualist Movement. This was about bringing these ideas into a liturgy centred especially on the Eucharist, which would once again take the principal

place in the Church of England. But the movement was not merely something liturgical. It also set up very active charitable groups, as well as religious communities such as the Society of St John the Evangelist. Some of these were inspired by St. Vincent de Paul. The Ritualist Movement, especially from 1859 onwards, was centred on the English Church Union, of which Lord Halifax became president in 1868. The Church of England, therefore, was experiencing a genuine theological, liturgical and pastoral renewal, a real “revival,” something which periodically happens in Anglo-Saxon countries. It was, then, a man of the first rank, animated by a deep faith, whom Fr. Portal met on the Island of Madeira.

In 1890, at the end of a journey, Portal suggested to Halifax that he become a Roman Catholic. He refused point blank, but this in no way affected their friendship. Perhaps the moment had come for dialogue on the basis of equality, making possible at the same time a better mutual understanding of the two Churches. This brotherly dialogue gave rise to wanting to work towards union between the Roman Catholic Church and the Anglican Communion.

It was therefore essential, at all costs, to continue the Madeira conversations. But how? To the amazement of the seminarians, Lord Halifax stayed in Cahors seminary from 2-7 April 1892. Here is what Msgr. Calvet says:

We were absolutely amazed to see (Lord Halifax) in the refectory sitting beside the superior at mealtime, while listening to Montalembert's The Monks of the West which was being read... But we were even more amazed when we saw him in the chapel, in the stall next to the superior's, following the liturgy with a missal – Roman, obviously, – kneeling down and making the sign of the cross. This got our brains working feverishly. After all, this man was a heretic! ... He was attending Mass with obvious fervour; he therefore believed in the Mass! Discussions were following their course (Ibid. pp. 11-12).

Meanwhile Portal had a scheme which he proposed to Halifax: to set up a meeting between Catholics and Anglicans, the purpose of which would be to debate the question of Anglican orders. The debate was merely the framework within which to hold a summit meeting between the hierarchies of the two Churches. With this in view Portal, since 1891, had been continuously compiling notes on priesthood in the Church of England. The question of the validity of Anglican ordinations was primarily a matter for historians and canonists, and in Portal's plan ought to allow subsequent study of the doctrinal divergences between Rome and Canterbury.

As bait for the theological debate Portal presented Halifax with a small booklet called simply *Les Ordinations Anglicanes*, which had been first

published in the December 1893 issue of *La Science Catholique*. In his work he was helped by the Anglican monk [Frederick William] Puller, a good theologian and expert on the Church Fathers. From the Anglican side, urged on by Halifax, the theologians Denny and Lacey published at the same time an essay in Latin *De Hierarchia Anglicana*.

Meticulously and diplomatically Portal demonstrated the nullity of Anglican orders, basing himself mainly on a doctrinal point, difficult enough to appreciate, the defect of intention. In order to do this he examined, from the historical point of view, episcopal ordinations of the 16th century during the reign of Elizabeth I, as well as the Anglican Ordinal. From another perspective, basing himself on the Decree for the Armenians of Pope Eugene IV during the Council of Florence (1439), he showed the invalidity of Anglican Orders through defect of rite. For the Catholic Church valid ordination depends on the rite of “the giving of the instruments,” the bible to candidates for diaconate and the chalice and paten to candidates for priesthood; nowadays this is very much a secondary rite, as the matter and form of the sacrament of orders are the imposition of hands and the consecratory prayer. In the 16th century the English reformers had kept only the giving of the bible, even for ordination to the priesthood, which was interpreted by the Catholic Church as a very Protestant wish to alter the nature of priesthood. But against this, they wished, in conformity with the usage of the primitive Church, to stress the imposition of hands and the consecratory prayer to the Holy Spirit as matter and form of orders. From the position taken in an earlier historical study Portal’s argument was to show that there was a long period in the Latin Church when “the giving of the instruments” had not been in use, and it had never been used in the Orthodox Church. Yet this did not in any way prevent the Catholic Church from holding that orders in the Orthodox Church are valid. So, getting down to essentials, why would the Roman Church not recognise for the Church of England what it does for the Oriental Church? In fact the western argument with regard to the sacrament of Orders and the “giving of the instruments” would be nothing more, according to Portal, than a simple disciplinary matter. He wrote: “If the Church has had the power to determine the sign, the Church can change it” (*Les Ordinations Anglicanes*, p. 34). Portal was aware of the weakness of the arguments in favour of the invalidity of Anglican Orders. But in the interest of objectivity in the debate which was soon to take place between Catholics and Anglicans, he presented the position of the Catholic party.

From the point of view of theological research Portal also wanted to show that a position, even one formally taken by the magisterium, could be led to evolve through new research, especially in the area of history. For that reason, the question of Anglican Orders remained an open question!

From the moment of its publication the booklet aroused strong reactions in the press, especially cross-Channel, which was something new. It was, in fact, the first time that the press reacted to an ecumenical debate. Fernand Portal and Lord Halifax had guessed accurately: a dialogue was getting under way. On the French side Portal founded the periodical, *La Revue Anglo-Romaine*, with the aim of keeping the French public informed on how the debate on Anglican orders was progressing. A further aim was to allow French Catholics to get to know the Anglican Communion by introducing the Church of England to the man in the street, or publishing articles by theologians like Puller, [Thomas A.] Lacey or [Charles] Gore.

There was an atmosphere of excitement when a pontifical commission met in Rome, on the initiative of Leo XIII; its aim was to study Anglican orders in greater depth. Portal went there in person in order to be nearer the source of information. The Roman group comprised mainly theologians and historians, among them a significant group of English Catholics. Some of them were known to be unyielding towards Anglicans. Some others were going to become famous later on. Msgr. Merry del Val would become so during the Modernist crisis, Abbé [Louis] Duchesne as a well known professor of History and Liturgy in the Institut Catholique in Paris, and Msgr. Gasparri as professor of Canon Law who would be one of the negotiators of the Lateran Treaty which brought the Vatican State into being in 1929. There were also two Anglicans there in Rome, Puller and Lacey. According to some English papers, like the *Daily Chronicle*, nothing was expected to emerge from this Roman commission. Among Anglicans, however, people like the Archbishop of York and Lord Halifax, were optimistic, and there was great confidence in Leo XIII that there would be a happy outcome.

In agreement with all the decrees of Our predecessors with regard to the same matter, and completely confirming them and re-stating them by Our own authority, on Our own initiative [*motu proprio*] and from certain knowledge We pronounce and declare that ordinations carried out according to the Anglican Rite have been and are absolutely void and totally null.

The sentence was a brutal shock when the Bull *Apostolicae curae* was published on 18 September 1896. After examination of the Anglican Ordinal the commission based its decision on defect of form and defect of intention in Anglican orders. In fact, though, behind the rigidity of the decision the text took a tutorist position with regard to the matter of the sacrament. The magisterium opted for the safest and most approved teaching. It was simply a question of staking out the land in some way so as to avoid any possible misunderstanding with the Anglicans, especially with those who came from the Oxford Movement who felt themselves to be so close to the Catholics.

The Anglicans were greatly disappointed, especially Lord Halifax. The Anglican archbishops replied to the Bull in a dignified way on 19 February 1897. Some months later the meeting of worldwide Anglican bishops, known as the Lambeth Conference, succeeded in leaving the doors open for further dialogue. For Portal the blow was certainly a hard one, but he did not take the path of rebellion. He wrote to his friend Halifax:

The future is with the peaceful. What you and your group have done for the reunion of Christianity will be to the eternal glory of the Anglican Church. You have shown perfect loyalty and generosity. Not everyone can say as much (Letter, 4 October 1896).

Portal wanted to retain confidence in the future, with a certain feeling of prophecy:

In nature nothing gets lost; this is even more true in the realm of the supernatural. A single act of love is more effective in producing infinite reverberations than the displacement of an atom. How many acts of love towards Our Lord and the Holy Church have not you and your friends made. Sooner or later the entire Church will be shaken. Let us not get discouraged, my dear friend.

But the immediate results were not slow in arriving. Publication of the *Revue Anglo-Romaine* was halted, and Portal was sent to the major seminary in Chalons-sur-Marne on orders of the Superior General [Antoine Fiat].

In the Aftermath of the Anglo-Roman Campaign

Outwardly life as a Vincentian missionary continued on its way. After Chalons-sur-Marne Portal was superior in the major seminary in Nice for two years. Then, because of his talents, he was recalled to Paris to direct the education of young men at university level. The reason was that the Séminaire des Carmes, run by the Sulpicians, was unable to cope with the number of its students. They asked the Vincentians to open a new house with Portal in charge. That is how the Séminaire Saint Vincent de Paul began, in 88 rue du Cherche-Midi. (This is the present Provincial House of the Paris Province).

Here again Portal was obviously keen to open up the minds of the young men and put them in touch with current problems. For that reason he formed a study circle, the aim of which was to look at facts and data of the most varied kind in order to sketch out a clear outline of the religious and intellectual life, both Catholic and non-Catholic. Portal was not a man who allowed himself to be imprisoned within narrow confines. We have to accept that for him the Church could not have frontiers! As was his custom, he did not neglect inviting people

of the most varied and diverse opinions. In that way the seminarians frequently rubbed shoulders with Anglicans, Protestants and unbelievers. In order to publicise what his study circle was doing he founded *La Revue Catholique des Eglises*.

But for a second time the chopper fell. In the Spring of 1908 Cardinal Merry del Val, who had become Secretary of State of Pope Pius X, personally contacted Antoine Fiat, the Superior General, and said that Fr. Fernand Portal was to be removed from his work and definitively forbidden to publish anything or to speak in public. That was a serious charge at the time. Portal was suspected of “modernism.” In a spirit of obedience and of love for the Church he abandoned his post as superior of the Séminaire Saint Vincent de Paul and scuttled *La Revue Catholique des Eglises*.

After six months of forced exile in a village in Seine-et-Oise he returned to Paris and took up residence in a flat in 14, rue de la Grenelle. All through this second period of trial he was constantly supported by the new Superior General, his friend [François] Verdier. If Portal was no longer able to publish or to speak in public, there was nothing to prevent him from receiving visits from anyone whom he wanted to see. Rue de Grenelle very quickly became a place for meetings and discussions for some of the students at the Ecole Normale Supérieure [Training College for Teachers], priests and Protestants.

It would not, though, be correct to see Fernand Portal as an intellectual shut away in his study amid his books, or busy with “theorising” with a group of students. He also needed to exercise his priestly ministry in the spirit of Monsieur Vincent, this need which all Vincentians have to have “their feet on the ground” in order to obtain a solid and balanced formation. He never tired of saying to his friends, even those most gifted for an intellectual vocation: “Always keep on some little bit of ministry!” For this reason he himself used to go regularly to the house of the Daughters of Charity in Reuilly. But his devotion used to turn him especially in the direction of a poor area in Paris, Javel. For Fernand Portal the Church is not primarily ideas, but rather persons who must be loved and served in the way Christ did. The scope of this article does not allow us to treat of Portal’s work in Javel, where he revealed the Vincentian spirit which animated him.

The Malines Conversations (1921-1925)

In spite of the difficulties and the Roman condemnations nothing had been able to change the friendship between Fr. Portal and Lord Halifax. Circumstances became favourable once again for reopening dialogue with the Anglicans. In fact, the most recent Lambeth Conference had appealed to all the Churches, especially the Orthodox, to aim at union of the Churches. Were

Catholics going to remain deaf to this call? Portal and Halifax were ready to grasp at any opportunity to reopen the official dialogue, suspended since 1896. Both of them got to know one of the most important men in Catholicism, Cardinal Mercier, Archbishop of Malines. Having sought the approval of Rome, Mercier, Halifax and Portal began organising meetings between Anglican and Catholic theologians. These took place in Malines. They could not be anything more than a simple exchange of points of view, but dialogue had been reestablished. But this was certainly a lot, considering the wounds of the Modernist crisis. There were no limits to hopes. Cardinal Mercier was also a believer in the summoning of a great ecumenical council in the near future! "There will be then, I hope, an opportunity to work for the union of the Churches," Portal wrote on 10 January 1925.

Once again hope was premature. Cardinal Mercier died on 23 January 1926, and Portal's death followed in June. Ecumenical dialogue was once again dimmed down to "pilot light." Before one of the dreams of Halifax and Portal would become real one would have to wait until the great event of Vatican II, the meetings between Pope Paul VI and the Archbishop of Canterbury, Michael Ramsey, and especially Pope John Paul II's visit to England in 1982. And yet, what a road was traveled in that year of 1926! Nothing was any longer as it had been. Abbé Hemmer, in his book *M. Portal et l'Union des Eglises*, quotes an Anglican: "Cardinal Mercier changed the religious atmosphere of England," and he added: "Perhaps one should say about Fr. Portal that he changed something in the religious atmosphere of the world."

As a Sort of Conclusion

The union of the Churches had been the dream and motivation of Portal's life. He devoted all his energy to this, in spite of the difficulties and the condemnations. But where was he able to find the strength needed to overcome the severe trials which never failed to crop up along his way, and to believe in the future? The answer definitely is in a great love of the Church of which he was always the faithful servant. And this love itself could have stemmed from a perception of the Church. In line with the thinking of the Church Fathers he saw the Church as more than a divine institution, he saw it also as the Mystical Body, a Body which is continually called to achieve its catholicity, that is its universality, by enriching itself from the spiritual patrimony of each of its members. The Church is also the Mystical Body of Christ animated by the strength of the Holy Spirit, a Body which cannot have fixed frontiers but must have borders constantly pushed further out in order always to welcome new members. The Church which Portal saw could not but be missionary. Such a mystery of the Church could draw close to the dynamic ecclesiology sketched at the start of the 17th century by Richard Field, Dean of Gloucester (1561-1616). In fact, the definition of the Church which he gave could have been taken up by

Portal. For Field the Church is “the multitude and number of those whom the almighty God has cut out from the rest of the world by the work of his grace and called to share eternal happiness...” (*Of the Church*, Bk I, Ch. 8). And this multitude “is the blessed number of Christians who have been, who are and who will be” (*Ibid* Bk II, Ch. 8). For Field and Portal the Church was without frontiers! Nothing should hinder all people in search of happiness from getting together in one and the same Church, no matter what their denomination.

In the 18th century the Sulpician, Joseph Grandet, wrote about St. Vincent that the founder of the Priests of the Mission “had the biggest heart in the world.” One could almost say the same about Portal, without forgetting Halifax. For them the Church could not remain enclosed within the narrow frontiers set up between the various denominations throughout the course of history. In their eyes the only thing that mattered was the One Holy Catholic and Apostolic Church; a way of living in Church according to the spirit of Monsieur Vincent!

But before ending let us once again allow Fr. Portal to speak of Church Unity:

The union of the Churches cannot, in fact, be achieved except by real apostles, in other words men of faith using spiritual means first of all: prayer which is the source of grace; charity which gives understanding of persons, even those from whom we are separated; humility which leads us to accept our defects and our faults. We are all guilty with respect to the Church. That is a certain fact which we must recognise. There, it seems to me, we have the essential elements of all action in favour of union (Le rôle de l'amitié dans l'union des Eglises).

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(THOMAS DAVITT, C.M., translator)