

Ecumenism of blood

2018 Christian Unity Address – Diocese of Cleveland

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I want to begin by thanking Father Joseph Hilinski, the Delegate for Ecumenical and Interreligious Affairs of the Diocese of Cleveland, and a long-time colleague in the Catholic Association of Diocesan Ecumenical and Interreligious Officers for the invitation to deliver the Christian Unity lectures this year. Also, I express my gratitude to Fr. Mark Latkovich, the Rector of this seminary, and its faculty for the wonderful welcome I received here. And thank you Father, for that kind, [if exhausting] introduction. Hearing it reminds me of one of the mysteries of priesthood. You may have an idea of what you want your ministry to be. You know it will somehow include parochial ministry, if you are preparing to be a diocesan priest, or the charism of the founder, if you are a religious. Beyond that are only the words “obedience and respect” for your local ordinary.

This course of ministry as an ecumenical officer was not my plan. I was always interested in Eastern Christian theology. I hoped to be a research professor, but never in becoming an ecumenical officer. So, I will tell you two secrets about the priestly life. First, there is no career plan. Secondly, Aristotle was right. By the second I mean that universals are composed of the sum total of particulars.

In my diocese, we have the custom of celebrating the 40th anniversary of ordination (rather than the 50th) as the capstone of priestly ministry. Since most priests still hold office at this age, it is a marvelous occasion where the people they are currently serving welcome the guests from the many other ministries where their priest has previously served. The whole is the sum of the parts. As you sit here in this seminary today, I can say without fear of contradiction that you have no idea who will with you gather 40 plus years from now around the altar of Christ to give thanks for a priesthood well lived. What I do know is that God will surprise you.

This address will be illustrated with stories from almost 40 years of ministry, which I hope will suggest to you two things. First, that the popular notion about ecumenism you may hear about are not the notions held by the Catholic Church. Secondly, that ecumenism is an imperative, for it makes possible the mission or evangelism. Every pope since Blessed John XXIII has called us to this imperative. There cannot be something like “Catholic Amish’ — a self-contained subculture that avoids the world. If we are not missionary, we are not Catholic.

[A new kind of ecumenism](#)

So, allow me to summarize a century. The Catholic Church formally entered the ecumenical movement about 60 years ago, during the early days of the pontificate of John XXIII. The Anglican, Orthodox and Protestant churches and ecclesial communities were suspicious as to what the pope was up to, until he established the Secretariat for Promoting Christian Unity. As one delegate observer to the Second Vatican Council noted: “When he put ecumenism into the Vatican budget, we knew something fundamental had changed. His comments about

Christian unity had to be taken seriously.” This pastor’s point was that action verifies words. And that’s a good insight for all of ministry.

Up to that point, the organized ecumenical movement was the merger of several different approaches. One was the Life and Works movement, which developed out of the social gospel insights of the industrial revolution. This approach said “doctrine divides but service unites.” It was this approach of ignoring doctrine that drew condemnation from a number of popes over the early years of the 20th century. It also earned the condemnation of the Evangelical community. The result was that the organized ecumenical movement tended to be the creature of the Anglican and Mainline Protestant Churches. But there were three other streams in the movement, which did not get the attention they deserved and which would be the elements which contributed to a evolution in the movement which would make it possible for the Catholic Church to engage it fifty years down the road.

The second approach was the World Christian Education Conference. This was a group that identified that poor catechesis was at the root of most of the churches’ problems. This movement quietly began founding small councils, mostly at the state level, to support Sunday school education in rural America. Most of the state councils of churches, such as the Illinois Conference of Churches , of which I was president in the mid-1990’s, had their start in Christian education.

More interesting to the Catholic Church was the third approach called the Faith and Order Movement. This group took the opposite approach to Life and Works. If doctrine is what divides, then only a doctrinal agreement will bring about real unity. Ultimately, this would be the avenue which Catholics would use to enter the ecumenical movement formally in the middle

20th century, by joining the Faith and Order division of the World Council of Churches. Most of the work of the Pontifical Council for Promoting Christian Unity, the Bishops' Committee on Ecumenical and Interreligious Affairs, and most diocesan ecumenical offices put their efforts into this form of ecumenical work.

Finally, and only now becoming well known, was the fourth approach, the World Missionary Conference. This group, which originated in 1910, the same year as Faith and Order, saw church division as the main obstacle to evangelism. Ecumenism, then, was seen as integral to mission and evangelism, to remove the main obstacle to proclamation.

In 1948, all four movements merged to form the World Council of Churches. Conciliar ecumenism, then, was the first expression of the movement. This wing of the ecumenical movement would have its greatest effect late in the 20th century as a place where Catholics and Evangelical could begin to explore joint evangelism.

A second "turning of this wheel" of ecumenism (to borrow a Buddhist expression) was the "new ecumenism" in the later decades of the 20th century. Examples are Evangelicals and Catholics Together, or the ecumenism promoted by *First Things* or *Touchstone*. This was an unofficial dialogue, with individual theologians rather than appointed delegates, largely exploring the issues of faith and culture.

But in the last ten years, there has been a third turning of the wheel, which we have taken to calling "missional ecumenism." This explores the possibility of Christians giving common witness to the Gospel for the sake of evangelizing the world even in our current state of division. I say "we" because I have been involved in this particular development, along with my former

colleague Bishop Robert Barron with our mutual friend Dr. John Armstrong, with the accompaniment of an unlikely supporter.¹ I'll have more to say about this later in the talk.

Now, as you heard, I am a seminary professor, in addition to everything else. For years I taught ecumenism at Mundelein. I described that course as 15 weeks of trying to get seminarians to care. This was in the years of Pope Saint John Paul II, and everyone was on fire with the new evangelization. Unfortunately, this led to a notion that apologetics should replace ecumenical efforts.

Because of faculty changes, I inherited our pilgrimage course.² Of course, being in the midst of so many other Christian churches, I moved many of the elements of the ecumenism course into the pilgrimage. Then a funny thing happened.

Down at the Church of the Nativity in Bethlehem, which is controlled by three different Christian communities, a dispute broke out over who had responsibility to clean a certain portion of the nave. The relations between communities is carefully defined and encoded in a law dating from the Ottoman Empire called the status quo. This law recognized that caring for a portion of the basilica is an expression of ownership. On this particular day, the Armenian monks and the Greek monks were cleaning the floor of the nave. One group exceeded its boundaries and before long there was pushing and shoving, followed by swinging brooms which resulted in a full scale riot which the Palestinian police had to break up.

¹ See John H. Armstrong, *Your Church is Too Small: Why Unity in Christ's Mission is Vital to the Future of the Church* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Zondervan, 2010), 153-164.

² Mundelein Seminary has a unique program where the third year graduate seminarians spend a semester abroad in the Holy Land. Five of our faculty members and the pre-deacons, live and study in Israel and Palestine visiting the sacred sites, and taking their regular courses while living in a small community. It is an intensification to the seminary experience, both a study-pilgrimage and a spiritual term.

All of this was caught on video and posted to social media. After this event, a seminarian came to me. He had had a very hard time entering formation because his immediate group of friends in college were non-religious and somewhat anti-Catholic. Once this video made it to the internet, they wasted no time sending it to him with the question; "So, this is the religion you're committing your life to?" He came to me, understandably upset. He said "Father, this is terrible. It makes Christians look stupid." In that instant, he understood how church division is an obstacle to evangelization. No clever arguments or apologetic will overcome negative witness. Only positive witness will. We proclaim that God is love. The world says "Yea, right. See how Christians "love" one another."

If you care about mission and evangelism you need an answer to that challenge. The answer, according to Pope Benedict XVI, is that we need witnesses before apologists.

Confessor of the Faith

I want to tell you about my experience meeting a confessor of the faith. He is a man just a little older than me. And his life story is quite similar. With two exceptions you may see your own vocational story as identical to his.

Samuel was born in Egypt, he was the youngest son from a devoted Christian family. His father used to take him regularly to the church even for the vigil services; he taught him since early childhood to pray in the Book of the Daily Prayers. (This is the Coptic Christian version of our Roman Liturgy of the Hours). At age 5, he became a server at the local parish in his home town. In 1960 the family moved to Alexandria, then joined a parish there. Under the direction of the local priest, he served also the altar of the Lord, and in Sunday Schools. Since his

childhood he was also mentored in the spiritual path by his uncle, who was a monk. The monk visited the family yearly and Samuel spent summer vacations in the monastery with his uncle.

On June 1972 Samuel graduated from the University of Alexandria, with a Bachelor degree in engineering. Late that summer, he started his service in the army till July 1975, and then he started working in a construction company for foundations.

Now, here is one part of the story that differs from mine or yours. Coptic clergy follow the same rules as our permanent deacons, so in 1975 he married a woman from a priestly family, and a Sunday school servant. He was nominated by his parish priest and the congregation, to be a priest for that church in Alexandria. In 1976 he was ordained a priest by His Holiness, Pope Shenouda III, Archbishop of Alexandria and the Patriarch of the Coptic Orthodox Church.

Now the second thing which is different about Father Samuel. It happened on September 3, 1981 the President of Egypt, Anwar Sadat, in a persecution of the Christian community, ordered the imprisonment of 24 priests and 8 bishops. Fr. Samuel was in prison for the faith until Feb. 22, 1982, almost four months. When he was released, however, the authorities forbid him to function as a priest. He endured this punishment for a year and a half. Then Pope Shenouda appointed him to serve the Coptic Church in the United States of America. He served first on the east coast and then was transferred to Chicago where I met him in 1990.

What I have found so remarkable in the years that I have known Father Samuel is the joy he radiates. On the very rare occasions which he will speak about his imprisonment for the faith, he speaks about the “undeserved privilege” God gave him to offer that faithfulness for his people.

The Coptic Church in Egypt is a suffering church, a church of martyrs. But when you speak to them, what you hear is awe and gratitude. Gratitude for being given a participation in the sufferings of Christ, and gratitude to be able to show their fellow Christians, and their persecutors, the joy of unity with Jesus Christ. Undeserved privilege.

This idea of missional ecumenism, in part, emerges out of the sufferings of Christians in different parts of the world. I titled this talk, "Ecumenism of Blood." With the awareness of our Coptic Christian brothers and sisters in mind, I'll next tell you the story of that title. To do so, I need to pick up on the Evangelical / Catholic dialogue I previously mentioned.

[A letter of encouragement](#)

Dr. John Armstrong, my Evangelical colleague and co-chair of the Evangelical & Catholic conversation, makes friends faster than anyone I have ever known. We met when we were both invited to take part in a program at a Nazarean Church outside Chicago. The organizers wanted a Catholic priest and a Protestant minister to fight out the Reformation controversies on stage for the congregation, many of whom were ex Catholics. Unknown to each other, we each said we would come, but that we would not debate. We each demanded a civil conversation. So the congregation got the anchorman from the ABC network affiliate, a seasoned professional journalist and a member of the congregation who knew me and I trusted to moderate. Under that condition I said yes. Dr. Armstrong and I spent a half hour answering careful, softball questions, never speaking to each other only to the moderator. But about a half hour in, we both felt that we could trust each other and broke our own rules and started to speak directly. By the end of the evening, we surprised the congregation that two religious leaders could disagree in

respect and both express faith and witness to Jesus. We both preached Jesus to that congregation. We both called them to deepen their relationship with him and when those who constituted his body. In a sense, missional ecumenism was born that night.

Many years passed, and we continued to do things like this. Eventually, though, Dr. Armstrong's vision expanded to reach internationally to Evangelicals and Pentecostals who were willing to gather with Catholics for the sake of mission. Out of this, the Evangelical & Catholic Conversation was born. We met initially at Mundelein and were able to gather participants from Argentina, Belize, Canada, England, Guatemala, Italy, Mexico, South Korea and the United States of America. Because of the success, we continued to meet. It was at our third meeting that we had a remarkable surprise. On the second night of the encounter, a letter arrived. It was addressed to the senior Protestant pastor of the group, the Reverend Dr. Norberto Saracco, President of the Pentecostal seminary in Buenos Aires. It was from a former member of a monthly prayer group to which Pastor Saracco belonged. It was like the priest support groups many diocese have, or like a Jesu Caritas group found in some seminaries. This group was made up of Catholic and Protestant religious leaders, including the author of the letter, who at the time was the Catholic bishop of that diocese. It read in part:

Dear Brother,

I remember with joy our meeting we had at my previous diocese with members of the Lausanne Movement. Together we shared the Word and prayer.

We know that the visible unity of the Church is the work and gift of the Holy Spirit, who will bring it about in His time. Meanwhile, any effort we make in

favor of the unity of Christians is necessary and urgent. The world needs to know Jesus. We must proclaim Him without any pause, together. The division among Christians is the fruit of our sin, and it is a scandal and our greatest impediment for the mission for which the Lord has called us: announcing the Good News of the Gospel.

Today, the blood of the many Christians slaughtered in diverse parts of the world cries out to heaven. The one that persecutes does not make a mistake, he doesn't ask if they are Catholic, Evangelical, Orthodox... they are Christians, followers of Jesus Christ, and that is enough. This blood challenges us: Do we have the right to make our divisions a priority while the blood of our brothers is shed for the testimony of Jesus Christ?

Pastor Saracco's friend went on to speak of the need for a new Pentecost. He concluded by saying:

My prayers and close support accompany you in the meeting.

And I ask, please pray for me, I need it.

Fraternally,

Francis

As we were trying to shape what missional ecumenism might mean, the Holy Father, in his accompaniment of us at that meeting, named the essential qualities: The world needs to know Jesus. We must proclaim Him without any pause, together. . . Do we have the right to make our divisions a priority while the blood of our brothers is shed for the testimony of Jesus Christ?

Pope Francis has repeated this sentiment a number of times, once to the Joint Commission for Theological Dialogue between the Catholic Church and the Assyrian Church of the East, of which I am a member. It is more than rhetoric. It is for Pope Francis something of an organizing principle for his ecumenical stance. But what does it mean, concretely? And what might it mean for you, who *inshallah* (as Arab Christians would say), will in one, two or three years be priests?

To answer those questions, I want to tell you about a former student of my seminary.

A seminarian's story

In the late 1990's the Patriarch of the Assyrian Church of the East was living in exile in Morton Grove, Illinois. He lived in Chicagoland because the situation in his ancestral see of Selucia-Ctesiphon had become untenable. It was just too dangerous for him to stay. Now, for context, you need to know that he was the former Bishop of Teheran. When Iran is the safe neighborhood for a Christian bishop, you have some idea of just how bad a situation was and is in the ancient seat of the Church of the East near Bagdad.

Not to put too fine a point on it, but Saddam Husain didn't like him. He came to Chicago in 1980. I met His Holiness, Mar Dinkha IV three years later and over the years, until his death March 26, 2015, I would receive wonderful Christmas cards from him. The Archdiocese of Chicago was the only jurisdiction that welcomed him to Chicago and offered him assistance as he tried to minister to a growing immigrant church driven from their ancestral home by the Iraqi wars. I met with him first when I was working for Cardinal Bernardin as an ecumenical officer, but it was only later on when their situation became more desperate, that I would see him with

any kind of regularity. With the vantage point that only the father of a world-wide Christian communion could have, His Holiness described, first to Cardinal Bernardin and later to Cardinal George, the trials that Christians were suffering in Iraq.

Now, there are Christians and there are Christians. The persecutions which the Church of the East suffered was first of all political. Saddam Husain had a policy of forced Arabization. His goal was a socialist Iraq, with everyone sharing the same Arab language and culture. He would tolerate minority religions only if they committed cultural suicide by abandoning their language and became Arabized. The Assyrians were not about to do this. So, Saddam had little use for Mar Dinkha. He would give millions of dollars to compliant Christians who Arabized. Mar Dinkha, he just wanted to get rid of. Now, when you are a totalitarian dictator of an oil rich Middle Eastern state, "get rid of" can have a variety of possible meanings. Mar Dinkha chose exile, first to the much safer Iran (let that sink in for a moment) and then to these United States.

Persecution is an interesting word. Most of the time, it is like a low-grade depression. It's not acute, but you don't make any progress. Doors simply will not open for you, no matter how hard you try. You won't get the job you want. You won't be able to enroll your child in the best schools. If you can enroll them, there won't be any scholarship money. Everything is just a bit harder, or costs a bit more, and you are paid a bit less. Other times, you are caught in collateral persecution. Some minority religion does something, and all suffer for it. You didn't do anything, but since you are not part of the majority, you experience collective punishment.

Sometimes though, there is overt hostility, where your group is targeted. These are usually short-lived, but quite brutal purges. But the worst of all is what is happening right now, civil war. There is really nothing worse than civil war. You could compare it to cancer, where

the cells of your own body turn against you. You are fighting yourself, which means there can be no winners or losers, only losers on both sides, for there really is only one side.

Geography tells most of these stories. On the news, you will hear about ISIS and the battles for northern Iraq. All well and good, until you know that northern Iraq means Christian Iraq. The Nineveh plain was the center of Christian life in that region for two millennia. The Kurds, who you hear about on the news as insurgents, are the only group that consistently protected Christians. If northern Iraq becomes more unstable, emigration will be the only choice and with it one of the oldest Christian communities in history will pretty much be history there. If you want to flee from northern Iraq your options are Syria, Lebanon or Iran. Again, you know you're in trouble when Syria, Lebanon or Iran are your best options.

The situation of the refugees is grim. I spent Thanksgiving week 2017 with the Chaldean Bishop of Aleppo and the Assyrian Bishop of Lebanon. They both fear a permanent emigration from Iraq. The radical forces enter an area and give people about 12 hours to flee. People who have lived side by side for half a century are turned against each other in a matter of hours, as they must make a choice, stay, and give instant evidence of support for the radicals, or flee. Christians are usually allowed to flee. A Muslim of the wrong sect is killed on the spot by the radical Muslims. You can imagine how utterly destabilizing such a situation is on the Christian community.

It is for this reason that the Joint Commission for Theological Dialogue between the Catholic Church and the Assyrian Church of the East ended its press statement on the results of the recent plenary meeting with a plea for the Christians of the Middle East. We wrote: "On this occasion, while experiencing joy at the progress of the dialogue, the Catholic Church and the

Assyrian Church of the East both feel pain over the suffering of Christians in Iraq and Syria and throughout the Middle East. The Commission calls on all people of good will to pray for the end of the violence and strife which affects the lands which first received the revelation of Jesus Christ, and to work through the means at their disposal for the support and care of refugees and those displaced by violence, whatever their religious confession.”

What are the means at our disposal for the support and care of refugees? This is not a rhetorical question. Look at the person next to you. [I’m serious. Turn and look at the person next to you]. Now, you might know this person pretty well, as a fellow deacon or seminarian. But none of you know where that person will be in ten or twenty years.

If you did this exercise at Mundelein Seminary 20 years ago, one of you would have turned and seen Afrem Athniel. Afrem was a student in the late 1990’s. I had arranged for Mar Dinkha to send him to seminary with us. He is one of the students I stay in touch with. I see him because he is a member of the dialogue commission. He is now the Assyrian Bishop of Syria, but he was not able to come to Rome this year. You see, his cathedral is in the town which is the landing zone for refugees. He is on the front lines, daily, with very little support. What does it mean to us that an alumnus of an American seminary is there in northeastern Syria? How does it change how we relate to this human tragedy to know that from an American seminary, a priest went forth and in God’s providence is pastor of refugees? I accompanied the Patriarch to a refugee center in Rome, for Italy has been very good at receiving those fleeing the conflict. Bishop Afrem was with us. What struck me so profoundly was that some of the refugees knew him. They ran to him, right past the Patriarch and hugged him. He even knew a number of their names.

As we pray for Christian unity this week, I would suggest that you read and reflect on the liturgical texts of the Mass for Persecuted Christians. And as you pray, I would suggest that one response could be gratitude. The Assyrian Church has no seminaries. Before coming to Mundelein, Afrem studied only with a tutor, an older priest, as his seminary formation. And his is a poor church. Funding had to be raised to pay his tuition. When he talks about seminary, his words express deep gratitude.

Each of you is here at Saint Mary Seminary under similar circumstances. Morris West, in his best seller about the papacy, *Shoes of the Fisherman* wrote the following for his character, Kiril Cardinal Lakota, to speak to his brother cardinals prior to the election of the pope.

We must consider what we are — priests, bishops, pastors — by virtue of an act of dedication to the people who are the flock of Christ. What we possess, even to the cloths on our backs, comes to us out of their charity. The whole material fabric of the Church was raised stone on stone, gold on golden offering, by the sweat of the faithful, and they have given it into our hands for stewardship. It is they who have educated us so that we may teach them and their children. It is they who humble themselves before our priesthood as before the divine priesthood of Christ. It is for them that we exercise the sacramental and sacrificial powers which are given to us in the anointing and the laying-on of hands. If in our deliberations we serve any other cause but this, we are traitors.³

³ Morris West, *Shoes of the Fisherman* (New York: Octopus/Heinemann, 1980), 692.

Each of you is sitting in a chair very similar to the one Afrem Athneil sat in. Each of you, God willing, will receive the anointing and laying-on of hands as he did. And in ten or twenty years, only God knows where you will be.

The world desperately needs Jesus. As we reflect on Christian unity, there is an urgency. The Holy Father's words open another horizon for us as Americans. I could paraphrase them this way: Today, the suffering of the many refugees in diverse parts of the world cries out to heaven. The one that persecutes does not make a mistake, he doesn't ask if they are Catholic, Evangelical, Orthodox, Muslim or Rohingya... they are refugees, the least of Jesus brothers and sisters, and that is enough. This suffering challenges us: Do we have the right to make our national interests a priority in the face of this suffering of our brothers and sisters?

This is not a political statement. The world judges Jesus by our witness. Actions verify words . . . What can we do? We are far away from Iraq or Syria, but let me end by suggesting three things.

First, personalize the news you hear. Do this by reading sources like *One* by Catholic Near East Welfare Association. Do not let the people spoken of in the news to become "the Other." Secondly, listen to the bishops with gospel ears, not political ones. When people talk about immigration polity – recall the story of the Good Samaritan. Remember also, the priests are not the heroes in the story. Finally, I know you are seminarians and have little money. But what you spend on one pizza meal would be a fortune where an average person lives on \$40.00 per month. Pick an international charity, like CRS or CNEWA and put some skin in the game.

Actions verify words. The world judges Jesus by our witness. Thank you for your attention.

The Very Reverend Thomas A. Baima is Vicar for Ecumenical and Interreligious Affairs of the Archdiocese of Chicago.