

Is Christ Divided?

*Week of Prayer for Christian Unity
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Today, the Catholic Church throughout the world concludes the Week of Prayer for Christian Unity. This annual octave, from the Confession of Peter to the Conversion of Paul, is intended as a time of intense spiritual effort to repair the division in the Body of Christ. Unfortunately, in the United States, two other issues requiring intense prayer are also commemorated this week. Martin Luther King Day, when the nation remembers the sin of racism and recommits itself to the right to equality of all persons, and the Day of Prayer for the Unborn, when the Catholic Church recommits herself to the right to life for all persons. In most dioceses, then, and Chicago is no exception, the feast of the Conversion of Saint Paul occurring as it does at the end of the week, becomes the best day for remembering the unity Christ wills for the Church and recommit ourselves to the right of all persons to hear the Gospel.

For some, the idea of locating the prayer for unity on a feast about conversion is uncomfortable. I have always thought differently. To me, ecumenism is all about conversion. Indeed, Christian unity is impossible without conversion. Some churches and ecclesial communities do not possess the fullness of the faith, sacramental life and ordered ministry which Christ willed for his Body. The only way to overcome division is conversion to Christ's will. So I am quite comfortable with the idea that ecumenism

requires conversion. Although, I am equally certain that the required conversion will be uncomfortable for just about every Christian.

Let me explain. For me, both ecumenical and interreligious work is rooted in ecclesiology and soteriology. Jesus the unique Savior, united with his Body, the Church carries out the Father mission to the world. This mission is universal. My particular focus, as an ecumenist, is to establish relationships through which misunderstandings and divisions might be lessened and room created for the movement of the Holy Spirit to call Christians to unity. The goal is to clear away the obstacles which stand between non-Christians and the truth of the Gospel. The divisions among Christians are just such obstacles.

In many ways, Paul was the first to preach the need for Christian unity. His rhetorical question, "Is Christ divided?" When he found factions in the churches under his care accepting division as somehow normal, his question, "Is Christ divided?" rings throughout the centuries as an indictment of anyone who accepts division. Paul knew that division in the house of God destroyed the credibility of the proclamation of the Gospel. Listen to the Apostle:

For I have been informed concerning you, my brethren, by Chloe's people, that there are quarrels among you. Now I mean this, that each one of you is saying, "I am of Paul," and "I of Apollos," and "I of Cephas," and "I of Christ." Has Christ

been divided? Paul was not crucified for you, was he? Or were you baptized in the name of Paul?...¹

I believe that the modern ecumenical movement (which I distinguish from any particular institutions at the service of the movement) is the work of the Holy Spirit. As such, a Christian is obliged to discern how this sign of the times. For me, ecumenism is the condition of the possibility of effective evangelism. If we wish to fulfill the Great Commission, Christians need to overcome the obstacles to the credibility of the Gospel which we have introduced to the world by our division. The Book of Common Prayer, one of the great pieces of English literature, warns us to “be aware of the great danger we are in because of our division. . .”² Ecumenism, from this perspective, is penitential, demanding conversion to the original intention of Christ for the Church. This is why I argue that conversion, both individual and corporate, is the essential goal of the ecumenical movement.

So, for those ecclesial communities who lack elements of the faith, sacramental life, especially the priesthood and the full reality of the Eucharist, the goal of ecumenism will only be achieved by change. These communities will need to convert to Christ’s will. And this will only come about when the Holy Spirit convicts them of their need to recover the fullness of truth and sanctification willed by Christ for his church.

¹ 1 Cor 1:11-13

² “Collect for the Unity of the Church,” *Book of Common Prayer* (New York: Church Hymnal Corporation), 818.

But, as I said, I expect that the conversion will be uncomfortable to all. For those churches that have preserved the faith, sacramental life and ordered ministry are not without need for conversion themselves. Even though they have preserved the gifts given to them by Christ, in many cases they existentially have only a portion of those gifts.

Here I am referring to an insight from Yves Cardinal Congar, the greatest Catholic ecumenist of the 20th century, who noted that all communities need to recover something they have lost. Congar notes that while the Orthodox and Catholic churches possess the fullness of truth and sanctification, some of the communities of the 16th century have realized a greater depth of Christian life with only a few of the gifts, than we who possess the fullness. This will mean the Catholic Church must change as well

Several popes have affirmed this insight. Pius XII and Paul VI both exhorted Catholics to recover the piety of bible reading, so esteemed by our Reformed brothers and sisters, and so neglected by Catholics. Blessed Pope John Paul II called on the other churches to suggest to him how the petrine ministry might be changed (not in essence but in its exercise) so that it would cease to be an obstacle to unity. And Pope Francis has said that the Catholic Church needs to recover from the Orthodox churches, the exercise of synodality. These would be real changes to the life of the Catholic and Orthodox churches. These would be conversions, not to the recovery of gifts, but the recovery of the *exercise* of gifts.

Ecumenism, then, as a work of the Holy Spirit, could be as dramatic as Paul's experience on the road to Damascus. At its core, it is recognizing Christ and his will for

us. This is why we can assert that the Catholic Church is the church founded by Jesus Christ which has preserved all the gifts Christ intended for his Body, and at the same time say she is in need of conversion. Ecumenism is all about conversion, conversion of whole communities to the will of Christ for unity and the full recovery of the exercise of the gifts of truth and sanctification he willed for his bride.

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