

Christian Unity: Have We Answered the Call?

St. Francis Xavier Church

17 January 2015

Ladies and Gentlemen: dear friends:

Introduction

Good morning everyone! Today is an auspicious one for this Conference because it marks the vigil of the Week of Prayer for Christian Unity, that Week which spreads “the oxygen of the authentic ecumenical spirit through the body of the Church.”¹ The organizing Committee of today’s Conference has chosen the date well for this Conference.

It is a great pleasure for me to welcome you here this morning for what promises to be a fascinating day of exploring together where we are in the ecumenical movement fifty years after the promulgation of the Second Vatican Council’s Decree on Ecumenism, *Unitatis Redintegratio*.

We are especially delighted and honoured by the presence of representatives of the various Christian traditions at this symposium: Anglican, Baptist, Catholic, Evangelical, Old Catholic, and Orthodox. I am especially thankful to Marjeta Bobnar, who is responsible for ecumenical and interfaith relations for the Archdiocese of Vancouver and for the Commission and team members. Moreover, my profound gratitude extends

¹ Francis, Message to the Plenary Assembly of the Pontifical Council for Promoting Christian Unity (24 November 2014).

to our two keynote speakers, Father Tom Rosica and Sister Donna Geernaert and to all the panelists who will further our discussion.

Thank you all so very much for your unflagging commitment to keep before the eyes of all of us the Lord's prayer at the Last Supper that we all may be one, "so that the world may believe that you have sent me" (Jn 17:21).

Indeed, it is good and pleasant for us as sisters and brothers to dwell together in unity!" (cf. Ps 133:1). We come together this morning as co-workers in the Lord's vineyard and fellow pilgrims on the path to his Kingdom. Before discussing the concrete initiatives accomplished and those that yet remain to be undertaken, let us not neglect giving thanks to God for the many fruits that have been reaped in this half century. If on occasion we have stalled, that should not diminish the great prayer of thanksgiving that should well up in our hearts for the graces we have all received.

As you know, the Catholic Church was rather a latecomer to the movement for the restoration of unity among all Christians. In fact, we were standoffish. But in November of 1964, the Second Vatican Council launched the Catholic Church headfirst into the movement when it promulgated the Decree on Ecumenism. In doing so, it was fulfilling the

desire of Pope John XXIII who had blazed the way by identifying the restoration of unity among Christians as a principal aim for the Council, and inviting ecumenical observers from other Christian Churches and ecclesial Communities to attend. That keen interest was continued by his successors, Popes Paul VI, John Paul II, Benedict XVI, and is certainly going full steam ahead with the various initiatives of Pope Francis.

For me, as someone who comes from an ecumenical home with a United Church mother and Catholic father, one of the greatest changes I have experienced is that now nearly all Christians realize that we cannot regard divisions in the Church as something natural, inevitable as in any form of human association. Our remaining divisions continue to draw us to contemplate this open wound in Christ's Body, which impairs the witness Christians are called to give to the Lord before the world. The Decree on Ecumenism, appealing to the text of Saint Paul unequivocally states in words that we can repeat often enough: "Such division openly contradicts the will of Christ, scandalizes the world, and damages the sacred cause of preaching the Gospel to every creature."² We have all been damaged by these divisions, both personally and as ecclesial bodies.

² Second Vatican Ecumenical Council, *Unitatis Redintegratio*, 1.

And so, for fifty years now we have all been on a journey together, a journey of healing those wounds, cooperating fraternally, on the path towards that visible unity desired by Christ and which comes as a gift from the Holy Spirit.³

Certainly, the attitude of we Catholics toward Christians of other Churches and Ecclesial Communities has changed dramatically. As Pope Francis recently remarked, “The hostility and indifference that dug seemingly unbridgeable chasms and caused such deep wounds are now a thing of the past, while a process of healing has begun that permits acceptance of the other as a brother or sister in the profound unity that comes from Baptism.”⁴

As we seek to put ourselves at the service of Christ’s desire for unity and to address the divisions that wound the body of Christ, we do well to recall the contribution that the Decree on Ecumenism has made to the ecumenical movement. But we also must evaluate its ongoing significance, its reception and issues which it did not explore but left open to later generations to uncover.

³ Cf. Francis, Homily (25 January 2014).

⁴ Francis, Message to the Plenary Assembly of the Pontifical Council for Promoting Christian Unity (24 November 2014).

Conclusion

The goal of full unity may still seem distant, but for all Christians it must remain the aim which should direct our every step in the journey. I find the plea expressed in the Decree on Ecumenism as a source of encouragement and hope: that we should move forward in deepening our bonds of cooperation at every level by placing no obstacle to the ways of divine providence and by not prejudicing future promptings of the Holy Spirit.⁵ That Spirit gives us the strength not to remain committed and invites us to trust fully in the power of what God can accomplish through us.⁶ With the guidance of the Holy Spirit and learning from one another may this Conference help us to deepen the communion which already unites us in Christ Jesus Our Lord.

✦ J. Michael Miller, CSB
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⁵ Cf. Second Vatican Ecumenical Council, *Unitatis Redintegratio*, 24.

⁶ Cf. Francis, Address to the Archbishop of Canterbury (16 June 2014).