



**SECOND SUNDAY OF ORDINARY TIME, YEAR A (2008):
ON CHRISTIAN UNITY
By Fr. Ambrose Bennett**

We are now in the midst of the Week of Prayer for Christian Unity, when the Church encourages us to pray for the unity of all Christians in one Fold and under One Shepherd. As we consider this theme of unity among believers, let us begin by reflecting on our second reading this morning. St. Paul addresses the Christians at Corinth as “the Church of God that is in Corinth, to you who have been sanctified in Christ Jesus, called to be holy, with all those everywhere who call upon the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, their Lord and ours” (1 Cor. 1.2).

Now that is a rather astonishing opening, considering the contents of St. Paul’s letter. The Corinthian Christians were guilty of the following: ignoring gross sexual misconduct, participating in pagan religious festivals, unworthy Communion, liturgical abuses, class conflict between rich and poor, denying the resurrection of the body, and outright rudeness toward the Apostle himself. Some of them were so insolent and rebellious that the Apostle was obliged to excommunicate them.

Well, things haven’t changed much, have they?

And yet, and yet, St. Paul never hints that the Church at Corinth is anything other than essentially one, holy, and apostolic: though already sanctified in Christ, yet their personal sanctification is imperfect and troubled. Though essentially one in Christ, yet the Apostle has to exhort the Corinthians in these words:

I appeal to you, brethren, by the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, that all of you agree and that there be no dissensions among you, but that you be united in the same mind and the same judgment (1 Cor. 10.1).

It never occurred to St. Paul that any of the abuses or sins of the Church at Corinth could be remedied by schism or by anyone daring to found his own church, out of communion with the Apostles and those they had appointed as their representatives. The solution to divisions can only be found by a return to what God himself has ordained for his people.

And so, it is in this light that I would like to look back on the origins of the Week of Prayer for Christian Unity in order to rediscover its true spirit and purpose. It seems that many have lost sight of the true meaning of Catholic ecumenism.

The Week of Prayer for Christian Unity actually originated in 1907, through the efforts of Father Paul Wattson. Father Wattson was an Episcopal priest who had founded an Anglican Franciscan order called the Society of the Atonement. These Franciscans of the



SAINT LOUIS ABBEY



Atonement established themselves in Graymoor, New York; after that, Father Wattson was known as Father Paul of Graymoor.

Now Father Paul of Graymoor had some astonishing opinions for an Anglican clergyman: you see, he had come to believe that union with the Pope as successor of Peter was the only God-given way to Christian unity. This astonished both Catholics and Anglicans: if you are a convinced papist, they told him, then why are you still claiming to be an Anglican at the same time? And Father Paul answered that though he believed the Catholic faith in its entirety and even accepted papal infallibility, he loved the Anglican Communion and wanted to work for corporate reunion between Anglicans and the See of Peter.

Knowing that such reunion was beyond mere human ability, Father Paul of Graymoor devised the Church Unity Octave. This was to be eight days of prayer that would run from the feast of the Chair of St. Peter on January 18 to the Conversion of St. Paul on January 25. The timing was meant to underscore the apostolic basis of Christian unity and to encourage Anglicans and Catholics and all other Christians to pray explicitly for unification through submission to the Pope as Christ's vicar on earth. On each day of the Octave, there would be special prayers for a particular separated Christian communion, imploring their return to Catholic unity. The last two days, however, had an evangelizing focus: the seventh day was dedicated to prayer for the conversion of the Jews and the last day to the missionary conquest of the world for Christ.

Father Paul had concluded that any other project for ecumenical unity would inevitably fail because it would be based solely on the will of man rather than on Christ's own plan for his Church. As St. Paul said to the Corinthians, "For no other foundation can anyone lay that that which is laid, which is Jesus Christ" (1 Cor 3.11). Father Paul had come to realize that, just as we don't need to re-invent the wheel, so we don't need to re-invent the visible unity of Christians: it has been given already in Christ's words to Peter,

Blessed are you, Simon Bar-Jona! For flesh and blood has not revealed this to you, but my Father who is in heaven. And I tell you, you are Peter, and on this rock I will build my Church, and the gates of hell shall not prevail against it. I will give you the keys of the kingdom of heaven, and whatever you bind on earth shall be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth shall be loosed in heaven (Mt 16.18-19).

It should come as no surprise that the first-fruits of Father Paul's prayer for reconciliation with the Pope was his own decision to become a Catholic and to bring his Anglican Franciscans with him!

This was the original inspiration of Father Paul's Octave of Unity, and it remains the true basis of Catholic ecumenism: we are incapable of creating unity but must be willing to accept it as a gift, on the terms that the Holy Spirit, the Lord and Giver of Life, has



SAINT LOUIS ABBEY



chosen to bestow it. All other efforts at Christian unity, based on some sort of loose federation or bureaucratic merger or doctrinal compromise, are based on nothing but shifting sand.

The founding prior of our monastery, Father Columba Cary-Elwes, published a book on the problem of Christian reunion immediately after he arrived in St. Louis. He must have already had the book with the publisher before he even set sail for the States, since his book includes a postscript dated “All Saints’ Day, 1955, St. Louis County, St. Louis, Missouri.” In any case, these were Father Columba’s words:

Christ, being God incarnate, fully realized that the world would last all these centuries. To deny this is to sink into the quagmire of Modernism, from which there is no salvation. If then, He knew the Church was to last so long, He knew, when He gave the promise and duty of ruling, teaching and sanctifying, that Peter and the Apostles would need successors. Christ went away to heaven, but He remained also through His Spirit, whom He sent. If the early Christians needed the voice of teaching and of sanctity after Christ’s Ascension, how much more those who came later. Christ’s Spirit speaks through these successors of the Apostles, the bishops in communion with the See of Peter, and through him who sits upon that Cathedra Petri [that Throne of Peter], the reigning Pope (*The Sheepfold and the Shepherd*, p. 197).

The Second Vatican Council said that the restoration of unity among Christians was one of its principal concerns and acknowledged that the grace of Christ is operative among non-Catholic Christians who are through no personal fault separated from Catholic unity. The Council called for serious efforts to overcome these schisms, especially through prayer, charity, and sympathetic understanding. In other words, the Council had in mind something along the lines of Father Paul’s Octave of Unity.

And who could possibly take exception to the goal of visible unity among all who believe in Christ and have been born again of water and the Spirit in the waters of baptism? Our gospel today tells us that Christ himself sanctified the baptismal waters by submitting to John’s baptism; and so Christ still sanctifies those who are born again of water and the Spirit. Even the divisions and conflicts among Christians cannot deprive baptism of its fruitfulness, for Christ is the Lamb of God who saves his fractious people.

However, from these generous words of the Second Vatican Council, a great many Catholics have drawn erroneous conclusions that the Council never envisaged and which the Church’s Magisterium has repeatedly corrected. Chief among these errors is the claim that the Catholic Church no longer identifies herself as the one true Church; the claim is that the Council retreated from this identification by saying that Christ’s one Church “subsists in” the Catholic Church, just as his Church “subsists” in other Christian communions, as well.



SAINT LOUIS ABBEY



This is completely mistaken. The word “subsists” means “is, in the true and proper sense, in its own right.” The Holy See has explained the Council’s meaning in this way:

The use of this expression [subsists], which indicates the full identity of the Church of Christ with the Catholic Church, does not change the doctrine of the Church. Rather it comes from and bring out more clearly that there are “numerous elements of sanctification and of truth” which are found outside her structure, but which “as gifts properly belonging to the Church of Christ, impel towards Catholic Unity” (*Responses to Some Questions Regarding Certain Aspects of the Doctrine of the Church*, resp. question #3).

To put it plainly: the path to unity is the integral acceptance of the Catholic faith and unity of faith with the Pope as successor of St. Peter and Vicar of Christ. We do our separated brethren a disservice if we do not say this plainly. So, yes, we do pray for the Catholic conversion of our Protestant friends and neighbors, for the conversion of the Jews, for the conversion of all people of all religions-- and no less fervently for our own conversion to a deeper Catholicity. As our Lord said in his High Priestly Prayer, “This is eternal life, that they know thee the only true God, and Jesus Christ whom thou hast sent” (Jn 17.3).