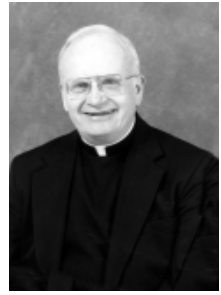


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## The ecumenical imperative --- “Is Christ divided?” (I Cor 1:13)

*“Is Christ divided?”* --- That question (perhaps more an ironic, evocative charge) was directed by the Apostle Paul to the Christian community at Corinth, a church divided by factions and rivalries. That Pauline text illuminates the biblical theme for the 2005 Week of Prayer for Christian Unity.

This year the annual Week of Prayer for Christian Unity drew its theme from the third chapter of St. Paul’s First Letter to the Corinthians --- *“Christ, the one Foundation of the Church (I Cor 3: 1-23)”* The Week of Prayer is held traditionally during the period from January 18 through January 25, the Feast of the Conversion of St. Paul.

By way of clarification, biblical commentators correctly point out that the divisions marring the unity of the apostolic church at Corinth were not doctrinal in their origin. Rather, the factions and cliques stemmed from the spiritual immaturity of those new Christians at Corinth. Their jealousies and rivalries had frozen them in a spiritual stage of “arrested development.” In truth, St. Paul addressed those unruly neophytes as “infants in Christ.” (I Cor 3:1)

Modern theological jargon might judge the conflict in Corinth as a situation

marked by a gap between “orthodoxy” [“right belief”] and “orthopraxis [“right behavior”].” The gospel must be incarnated in lives; otherwise the power of the cross risks being neutralized.

Commenting in *The Saving Word* on the second reading for the Third Sunday of the Year (A), Father Wilfrid Harrington, O.P., provides a succinct summary of the state of affairs addressed by St. Paul in chapter one of the First Epistle to the Corinthians. The bonds of brotherhood and sisterhood within that Christian community were being severely tested: “Apart from the jealousy and wrangling (3:3) that characterized the behavior of the Corinthian Christians, there were rival factions among them.” Paul invoked the need for safeguarding unity over against the divided loyalties within the contentious church at Corinth.

In his commentary on this same passage in First Corinthians, Father Jerome Murphy-O’Connor, O.P., another noted Dominican scripture scholar, writes that confronting the Corinthian controversy became an opportunity for St. Paul to elucidate the authentic power of the gospel as well as a correct understanding of the foundational role of apostles in the New

Testament.

Father Murphy-O'Connor notes that the roots of the division at Corinth bear kinship with a perennial temptation faced by Christians throughout the ages, namely, "the tendency to understand the structures of Christian existence in terms of models drawn from a fallen world."

In this vein, the background materials prepared for this year's Week of Prayer identify the root cause for the divisions at Corinth as "a matter of not leaving behind the old unredeemed patterns of human behavior."

By extension, however, that insight into the problem at Corinth can raise broader questions for the divided Christian churches involved in the ecumenical movement today: "... to what extent are the tensions among us caused by differences in our teaching? How much pride is still among us? To what extent does a longing for power control our actions instead of a desire and readiness to serve?"

In a word, do the divisions at Corinth foreshadow "the divisions which historically would scar our unity in Christ?"

The "Glossary" of the *Catechism of the Catholic Church* describes ecumenism as the "(p)romotion of the restoration of unity among all Christians, the unity which is the gift of Christ and to which the church is called by the Holy Spirit."

Forty years ago, the Second Vatican Council's *Decree on Ecumenism (Unitatis Redintegratio, 1965)* became the magna charta of the Catholic Church's participation in the ecumenical movement. Thirty years later, *That All May Be One (Ut Unum Sint, 1995)*, Pope John Paul II's encyclical on ecumenism, reinvigorated the conciliar commitment to ecumenism with a new sense of urgency and renewed direction.

In that encyclical, Pope John Paul II testified to the pastoral priority which he

personally ascribes to ecumenism: "When I say that for me, as Bishop of Rome, the ecumenical task is 'one of the pastoral priorities' of my Pontificate, I think of the grave obstacle which the lack of unity represents for the proclamation of the Gospel." (UUS n. 99)

Pope John Paul II emphasizes that "ecumenism is an organic part of her [the Church's] life and work, and consequently must pervade all she is and does ..." (UUS n. 20) Accordingly, the promotion of Christian unity is "a duty of Christian conscience enlightened by faith and guided by love." (UUS n.9)

More recently, in a homily at a Vatican sponsored ecumenical conference in November 2004, the Holy Father again reconfirmed the promotion of Christian unity as a pastoral priority of his papal ministry. Admittedly the ultimate goal of ecumenism --- "full and visible communion in the same faith, the same sacraments and the same apostolic ministry" -- - still remains unattained.

Moreover, although progress has been achieved in overcoming differences and misunderstandings as steps towards fuller communion, Pope John Paul II also names specific disappointing stumbling blocks on the path to Christian unity. The ecumenical journey is short-circuited not only by persistent misunderstandings and biases "but also deplorable slowness and closed-heartedness."

On this point, the Holy Father refers to his apostolic letter *At the Beginning of the New Millennium (Novo Millennio Ineunte, 2001)*. There he stressed that Christ's prayer for unity --- "*ut unum sint*" (Jn. 17:21) --- is "a binding imperative, the strength that sustains us, and a salutary rebuke for our slowness and closed-heartedness." The hope that "even within history we shall be able to attain full and visible communion with all

Christians" is founded on Jesus' prayer, not on ungraced human efforts. (NMI n. 48)

Abbe Paul Couturier, a French priest who was one of the pioneers of the observance of prayer for Christian unity, penned the following in 1939: "The whole fabric of Christendom must be shaken to its very depths by the universal prayer for Christians; it must experience a supernatural shock which will break down its prejudices, rectify its superficial and false ideas, cause hearts to grow into one another, and finally unite minds in the eternal light of the one Christ."

The stumbling blocks of "deplorable slowness and close-heartedness" concerning the urgent task of promoting Christian unity might well illustrate the implications of the theme for the 2005 Week of Prayer for Christian Unity. To what degree are such obstacles formed by lingering "unredeemed patterns of behavior?"

Pope John Paul II concluded *Ut Unum Sint* with an "Exhortation" that the Church persevere in asking "the Holy Spirit for the grace to strengthen her own unity and make it grow toward full communion with other Christians." (UUS n. 101)

That grace can only be obtained through prayer. That grace must be obtained both through giving thanks and "(t)hrough hope in the Spirit, who can banish from us the painful memories of our separation" and "is able to grant us clear-sightedness, strength and courage to take whatever steps are necessary,

that our commitment may be ever more authentic." (UUS n. 102)

That pastoral zeal for the search for Christian unity, so integral to the ministry of Pope John Paul II, was already manifest in *Redeemer of Humanity (Redemptor Hominis, 1979)*, his inaugural encyclical, which included the topic "The road to Christian unity" in the opening sections. In discussing the new ecumenical orientation emanating from the Second Vatican Council, the Holy Father questioned how far along the road to achieving unity the Church had progressed at that moment. While acknowledging "real and important advances," he called for a continued "seeking sincerely, perseveringly, humbly and also courageously the ways of drawing closer and of union."

To criticisms of ecumenical initiatives and the fears of indifferentism, Pope John Paul II countered: "To all who, for whatever motive, would wish to dissuade the Church from seeking the universal unity of Christians the question must once again be put: Have we a right to do so? Can we fail to trust --- in spite of human weaknesses and the accumulated feelings of centuries --- in our Lord's grace as revealed recently through what the Holy Spirit said and we heard during the Council ...?" (RH n. 6) Failure to trust in grace of the Lord would be "unfaithful to the word of Christ" --- "*I pray ... Father ... that they may all be one.*" (Jn. 17:21)

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