

Christian Unity

One of the disheartening experiences that families go through is when there is strife and unforgiveness among them. A son or daughter may be alienated from the rest of the family with little or no communication for years. Parents want to see their children and relatives reconciled of their differences before they die, but often that does not occur. If we think of God as a parent for a moment, how do you think God feels about the disunity that exists among Christians? I think it grieves the heart of God.

I attended a large ecumenical conference way back in 1977 that made a lasting impression upon me. Thousands of Christians gathered to pray and listen to anointed speakers, and one theme was unity in the Church of Jesus Christ. A man who was blessed with the gift of prophecy gave a message from the Lord that challenged all of us. The gist of the message cut right to the heart: "Mourn and weep for the Body of my Son is broken... Turn from the sins of your fathers. Walk in the ways of my Son." What we all understood was that even though we inherited a divided Christendom, God was asking each of us to do something about it.

The Second Vatican Council (1962-65) took a big step forward to reach out to what was called "separated brethren", our brothers and sisters in Jesus. The document on Ecumenism made it clear that "all those justified by faith through baptism are incorporated into Christ." (UR par. 3) This and future documents brought various Protestant denominations into dialog with Roman Catholics to find areas of common ground as believers, and to truly respect each other as members of the Body of Christ. A starting point is the prayer of Jesus at the Last Supper "that all may be one" (John 17:21)."

One practical result of these dialogs was to encourage all Christians to pray together and to work side by side on common projects that benefit the Church and local communities. Actually, for over 100 years, Christians have celebrated a Week of Prayer for Christian Unity from January 18-25, ending on the feast of the conversion of St. Paul. The theme this year is from Acts 2:42: "They devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and fellowship, to the breaking of bread and the prayers." It is encouraging to see parishes or regions holding joint services at other times of the year, such as the eve of Thanksgiving and Pentecost Sunday. Praying together is always a good beginning.

Most of us have inherited prejudices about non-Catholic Christians from our youth. We carry subconscious attitudes of dislike and superiority that do not foster harmony and friendship. We see the sins and weaknesses of other Christian communities and often joke about these to each other. But let's remember that we Catholics have our sins and weaknesses too. It takes work, even repentance, to divest ourselves of these prejudices and to let the truth of our union in Christ tear down walls and build bridges. No one can do this for us. Each of us has to mourn and weep for the divisions we find among Christians, and strive to be part of the solution and not part of the problem.

Reflections: by Father Michael Salvagna

Wouldn't it be great if we could live here on earth the way the angels and saints live in heaven? Yes, that's dreaming. But it is something we are asked to work for each day. May God use us to bring unity and healing among the disciples of Jesus.