
Ecumenism and the Need for a Reconciled Church



--- "unity in what is **necessary**, **freedom** in what is doubtful, and **charity** in everything." (Gaudium et Spes n, 92)

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An ironic challenge --- "*Is Christ divided?*" (1 Cor. 1:13) was directed by the apostle Paul to the Christian community at Corinth, a neophyte church troubled by factions and rivalries. That provocative text highlighted the theme for the 2005 Week of Prayer for Christian Unity --- "*Christ, the One Foundation of the Church*" (1 Cor. 3:1-23)

By way of clarification, biblical commentators correctly point out that the divisions which were marring the unity of the apostolic church at Corinth were not doctrinal in their origin. Rather, the factions and cliques had stemmed from the spiritual immaturity of those new Christians at Corinth. More likely, their jealousies and rivalries had frozen them in a spiritual stage of "arrested development."

In his commentary on First Corinthians, Dominican Father Jerome Murphy-O'Connor 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.

In this vein, the background materials for the 2005 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."

Without doubt, insight into the conflicts at Corinth can be extended to raising broader questions for the presently divided Christian churches active in the ecumenical movement. Since unity within churches and ecclesial communities themselves is crucial to ecumenical dialogue, the original context of this passage can also speak to divisive polarization which at times dots the ecclesial landscapes of those very bodies.

Further examples of exhortations to unity amid diversity permeate the various epistles of St. Paul. A pivotal passage from the Epistle to the Ephesians also serves as a prime illustration of his pastoral zeal for internal unity.

Thus, St. Paul declares: "All bitterness, fury, anger, shouting, and reviling must be removed from you, along with all malice. [And] be kind to one another, compassionate, forgiving one another as God has forgiven you in Christ." (Eph. 4: 31-32)

Again, St. Paul addressed the scandal of quarrels, jealousy, bad temper, factions, and malice when he chided the Galatians: "... rather serve one another through love. For the whole law is fulfilled in one statement, namely, 'You shall love your neighbor as yourself.' But if you go on biting and devouring one another, beware that you are not consumed by one another." (Gal. 5: 13-15) [The translation of that warning in the *Revised English Bible* is equally poignant: "all you can expect is mutual destruction."]

In *Loving the Church* (2005) Capuchin Father Raniero Cantalamessa, preacher to the papal household, compares threats to unity in the Body of Christ with life-threatening embolisms in the human body.

By analogy, just as blood clots obstruct circulation and, if not dissolved, can ultimately lead to paralysis and death, an unreconciled church community represents a spiritually lethal condition. Father Cantalamessa proposes an examination of conscience for personal responsibility for "the refusal to forgive, lasting hostility and the bitterness, wrath, anger, slander, and malice"

There are more and more leading cultural indicators that public conversation is becoming disproportionately confrontational, hostile, derisive, and insulting. Regrettably, for some time, this cultural trend has been becoming visible in some quarters of church life. Such

signs of diminishing civility in society which Cardinal Francis George once described in terms of "public irritability, undisguised rage, raw ambition, lack of basic honesty and plain rudeness" have been making subversive inroads within the life of the church itself.

Acrimony, accusation, the impugning of motives, and name-calling far too often displace charity, humility, and love for the truth. Such negative factors carry a potential threat to the ecclesial bonds of unity

Consequently, instead of standing as a countercultural sign of unity and communion, the witness of the Church community itself can be seriously impaired and compromised.

The *Decree on Ecumenism (Unitatis Redintegratio, 1965)* identified the restoration of Christian unity as a principal concern of the Second Vatican Council. Besides contradicting the will of Christ and the inherent scandal, a divided Christianity obstructs evangelization, the mission of "preaching the gospel to every creature." (UR n. 1)

The Decree notes that "[t]he faithful should remember that they promote unity among Christians better, that indeed they live it better, when they try to live holier lives according to the Gospel." (UR n.7) Love, forgiveness, reconciliation, peace, and communion are indispensable mandates for growth in mutual love.

In a 1997 pastoral letter, "Speaking the Truth in Love: Christian Discourse Within the Church," Bishop Donald Wuerl of Pittsburgh raised a telling question about the scandal of internecine conflict among Catholics: "*Who would be drawn to a community whose discourse is filled with rancor, mistrust, and hatred?*"

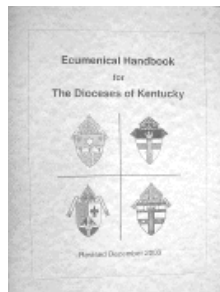
From the perspective of the search for unity, Pope Paul VI treated the deleterious impact of divisions among Christians on the power of evangelization in *On Evangelization in the Modern World (Evangelii Nuntiandi, 1975)*. Unity among the followers of Christ is "the test of the credibility of Christians and of Christ

himself." Evangelization entails an "image of people who are mature in the faith and capable of finding a meeting-point beyond the real tensions, thanks to the shared, disinterested search for truth." By contrast, evangelization is sabotaged by "the image of a people divided and separated by unedifying quarrels." (EN n. 77)

In this regard, *A People Made One*, the 1999 pastoral letter of the Catholic bishops of Kentucky on ecumenism, cautioned about the lack of unity in relationships among Catholics themselves. The will to have personal views dominate may at times undermine a vital principle endorsed by the Decree on Ecumenism "unity in essentials," "freedom in the various forms of spiritual life and discipline, in the variety of liturgical rites, and even in the theological elaborations of revealed truth," and "in all things let charity prevail." (UR n.4)

A People Made One confronts a sensitive area when it states that "[s]ometimes spiritual ecumenism and the ecumenism of repentance find their greatest need within the churches themselves and not only between members of separate traditions."

Otherwise, there is an alarming prospect to be faced: "Our own disunity aggravates the disunity found among all."



This article is the 6th of a series of six written by members of the Catholic Conference of Kentucky's Ecumenical Committee.

The 27-page *Ecumenical Handbook for the Dioceses of Kentucky* is available from your diocesan ecumenical office and can be downloaded from the Catholic

Conference of Kentucky website: www.ccky.org/publications.htm.

"For the ties which unite the faithful together are stronger than those which separate them: let there be unity in what is necessary, freedom in what is doubtful, and charity in everything." [Gaudium et Spes (1965) n. 92]



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