

Separated Brethren

There is one body and one Spirit, ... one Lord, one faith, one baptism, one God and Father of us all, who is above all and through all and in all. ~ Ephesians 4:5-6

Jesus Prays for Unity

AT HIS LAST SUPPER, on the night before he died, Jesus discussed many things with his disciples — the necessity of humble service to one another, his imminent departure from them and the sorrow this would cause them, his unity with the Father, the promise of the Holy Spirit, how they would bear fruit only by being joined to him as branches are joined to a vine, self-giving love to the point of death, the certainty that his disciples would be persecuted, and the promise of his Resurrection and final departure (see Jn 13-16).

“Jesus’ ‘last will and testament’ is a heartfelt prayer for unity.”

But when he then prayed to his Father, in what was in effect his “last will and testament,” he dealt with none of these things. Most importantly, he asked his Father to protect his disciples and all those who come to faith in him: *“I do not pray for these only, but also for those who believe in me through their word, that they may all be one; even as thou, Father, art in me, and I in thee, that they also may be in us, so that the world may believe that thou hast sent me. The glory which thou hast given me I have given to them, that they may be one even as we are one, I in them and thou in me, that they may become perfectly one, so that the world may know that thou hast sent me and hast loved them even as thou hast loved me”* (Jn 17:20-23). He especially asked his Father to *“sanctify them in the truth; thy word is truth. As thou didst send me into the world, so I have sent them into the world. And for their sake I consecrate myself, that they also may be consecrated in truth”* (Jn 17:17-19). Jesus’ last extended prayer before his death is thus a heartfelt prayer for unity among his followers, founded on the truth of the Father’s word.

Christianity is Divided

Yet we all know to our shame and sorrow that Christianity is divided. This has been true from the very beginning, as we find evidence of in Scripture



A Russian Orthodox Church

(see Acts 15:1-29; 2 Tm 4:3-4; 2 Pt 3:15-17). The nearly two thousand years of Christian history are a history of *schism* (refusal to acknowledge the Pope’s authority, or refusal to be in communion with those who do acknowledge his authority), *heresy* (obstinate doubt of, or refusal to believe, a doctrine of the Church by a baptized person), and *apostasy* (complete repudiation of the faith). None of the breaks in Christian unity have occurred without sin, and sometimes not only schismatics, heretics, and apostates sinned but also those who spoke and acted on behalf of the Church, so usually all involved bear the weight of some blame. These events always deeply grieve God.

In the present age, there are two major types of divisions in Christianity (many others of the past have been healed). The first is the schism of the Eastern



Churches, which do not accept papal primacy. This division, brewing for hundreds of years, became final in the 11th century. Efforts over the next few centuries to repair the break were only partially or briefly successful. There has been progress in the last several decades, but enough hurt and distrust remain that unity among Catholic and Orthodox Churches does not appear to be imminent. (Orthodox Churches are to be distinguished from Eastern-rite Catholics who acknowledge the primacy of the Pope.)

The second division arose with the establishment of Protestant denominations, beginning in the 16th century and continuing to the present. Their differences with the Church are much greater than papal authority alone. A few Protestant communions do not even acknowledge the Catholic Church as Christian, but believe her to be an apostate body while they themselves are the heirs of the true faith. This viewpoint, together with the bitterness of the history of the divisions between Catholicism and Protestantism and the fact that entirely different vocabularies of faith have developed, means that working for Christian unity is a task that takes tremendous prayer, energy, and perseverance.

It should be noted that there are faith communities that, while they spring from Christianity, are not Christian because they do not worship the Triune God nor acknowledge the divinity of Jesus even if they give him honor. These include, for example, Unitarian-Universalists, Mormons (Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-Day Saints), and Jehovah's Wit-

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nesses. Although these faith communities are not “separated brethren” in the same sense as Christian communions, their members are nevertheless our brethren in the common Fatherhood of God.

Jesus Died to Save Everyone

One of the most significant differences in belief between Catholics and some other Christian communions has been whether Jesus died to save everyone or only some people. Believers in a limited salvation sometimes use the term “predestination,” meaning that God intends salvation for only some people, but not for all of humanity. This belief seems to find warrant in St. Paul’s Letter to the Romans: *“For those whom he foreknew he also predestined to be conformed to the image of his Son, in order that he might be the first-born among many brethren. And those whom he predestined he also called; and those whom he called he also justified; and those whom he justified he also glorified”* (Rom 8:29-30).

Yet there are other passages that clearly state that Jesus died for everyone, written also by St. Paul. Earlier in the same letter, he wrote: *“One man’s act of righteousness leads to acquittal and life for all men”* (Rom 5:18). In other letters, St. Paul said the same thing even more clearly: *“[Jesus] died for all, that those who live might live no longer for themselves but for him who for their sake died and was raised”* (2 Cor 5:15), for *“the grace of God has appeared for the salvation of all men”* (Ti 2:11) and, through Jesus, God was pleased *“to reconcile to himself all things, whether on earth or in heaven, making peace by the blood of his cross”* (Col 1:20). And St. John wrote: *“[Jesus] is the expiation for our sins, and not for ours only but for the sins of the whole world”* (1 Jn 2:2; see also CCC 605).

In addition, St. Paul explicitly teaches that God loves each of his human creatures, and wants them all to share his life in heaven: *“God has not destined us for wrath, but to obtain salvation through our Lord Jesus Christ”* (1 Thes 5:9; see also 1 Tm 2:3-4). There is

predestination, but it is a predestination for eternal life with God. Those who do not go to heaven have themselves chosen against God; God did not choose against them. The Scriptures teach that *“the gospel... is the power of God for salvation to every one who has faith, to the Jew first and also to the Greek”* (Rom 1:16), and thus Jesus *“became the source of eternal salvation to all who obey him”* (Heb 5:9). We are called to have faith in Jesus and to obey what he has commanded us.

Jesus is Our Only Salvation

Furthermore, the Scriptures teach us that Jesus is our only source of salvation: *“There is salvation in no one else, for there is no other name under heaven given among men by which we must be saved”* (Acts 4:12). St. Paul says the same: *“There is one mediator between God and men, the man Christ Jesus, who gave himself as a ransom for all”* (1 Tm 2:5-6).

The salvific power of Jesus is not limited to those who know him, however. Many millions of people have never had the Gospel preached to them or, having heard something about it, have not had it preached in a way that calls forth a genuine response. Yet even those who are not aware of him, and cannot therefore have faith in him or seek Baptism, nevertheless if they seek God earnestly and live upright lives in accordance with the natural law may obtain salvation through the merits of Jesus Christ (see CCC 846-847).

The Role of the Church in the Salvation of All

Throughout the centuries, the Church has taught that there is no salvation outside the Church. This applies most directly to anyone to whom the Gospel

has been efficaciously preached: *“They could not be saved who, knowing that the Catholic Church was founded as necessary by God through Christ, would refuse either to enter it or to remain in it”*¹ (CCC 846; italics added). Yet those who are not members of the Catholic Church may nevertheless have been justified by Baptism and receive sanctification by the Holy Spirit in their lives. For those who are not formally members of the Church, *“the Spirit of Christ has not refrained from using [other communions] as means of salvation which derive their efficacy from the very fullness of grace and truth entrusted to the Catholic Church”* (Pope John Paul II, *That They All May Be One* 10). The Church thus has *“an indispensable relationship with the salvation of every human being”* (Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, *Declaration on the Unicity and Salvific Universality of Jesus Christ and the Church* 20).



Christ as a Pilgrim, by Fra Angelico, 1587-1455

“Human effort alone will never accomplish Christian unity.”

conversion in our own lives to seek greater holiness, for it is lack of fidelity to the Gospel that causes divisions. This fidelity must extend, as well, to the authority of the Church, the only authentic interpreter of Sacred Scripture. Nearly all the divisions within Christianity have been caused by problems of submission to authority — that is, the root of the problem of disunion is a setting of individual opinions and beliefs above the teaching authority of the successors of the apostles, the Pope and bishops in communion

What We Must Do

Every Catholic has the obligation to seek and work for Christian unity, for the witness we give to the world about the divine mission of Christ is greatly hindered by the divisions that mark Christianity today. We must first begin by con-

¹ *Lumen Gentium* 14; cf. Mark 16:16; John 3:5

with him. (Many people who think of themselves as Catholics in good standing are, sadly, guilty of this as well.) Nevertheless, people born into their respective faith communions and brought up in the faith of Christ are brothers and sisters to all Christians. "All who have been justified by faith in Baptism are incorporated into Christ; they therefore have a right to be called Christians, and with good reason are accepted as brothers in the Lord by the children of the Catholic Church"² (CCC 818).

Specific forms of work toward Christian unity depend on each person's vocation. For the average lay Catholic, prayer in common with other Christians, and joint work with Christians in various kinds of good works, such as service to the poor, social justice, health care to the needy, and promoting the cause of life are beneficial not only to the causes served but to the Christian fraternity of those working together. This kind of collaboration is also possible, and desirable, with members of non-Christian faith communities.

In these endeavors, the Catholic must always keep in mind the importance of witness. This means treating everyone with true Christian love and, when appropriate, explaining the true faith in Jesus Christ that animates our lives in a way that does not raise the hackles of others or give unintentional hurt. At the same time, Catholics must be careful to avoid the pitfalls of false ecumenism. When engaged in dialogue with members of other Christian communions, and with non-Christians, it is very easy, out of misplaced kindness and compassion, to treat all approaches to God as equal. *This is a disservice to others who deserve to know the fullness of God's revelation and saving actions, and to receive the fullness of his grace.* Respect for religious freedom and for others' faith traditions cannot prevent us from being witnesses to the truth that the Church has the fullness of truth. We cannot, however, take a boastful attitude, for everything we have received is pure gift from God and has nothing to do with our own merits (see 1 Cor 4:7). Instead, we must always recognize that many elements of truth, and God's grace to sanctify his children, can be found outside the visible Church, and that we will sometimes encounter great holiness in the lives of

individuals who have responded fully to the graces they have been given. We must approach our separated brethren with true fraternal charity born of humility, an acknowledgment of the holiness of life to be found in members of every Christian community, and a deep unity born of our common faith in our Lord Jesus Christ and the witness of faith in him to the point of martyrdom given by Christians throughout the world.

Practical Concerns

Nearly all Catholics face very practical problems relating to the divisions within Christianity. The Catholic must learn, for example, how tactfully not to partake of the "Lord's Supper" in a non-Catholic worship service, and how tactfully to explain, in

turn, to non-Catholics attending Mass why they may not partake of the Eucharist, the sign of the Church's oneness of faith, life, and worship. The Catholic will not ask a non-Catholic to be the sole godparent

of his or her child. The Catholic will attend with joy and celebration the wedding of non-Catholic friends in a Protestant service, but will gently explain to a Catholic family member or friend intending to marry outside the Church that he or she cannot be present since the marriage, while valid in civil law, is not valid in the eyes of the Church. In general, the Catholic's actions will be the soul of charity without giving others reason to wonder if he or she truly believes "*the faith which was once for all delivered to the saints*" (Jude v 3).

Reason for Hope

There has been progress toward Christian unity, and we should never lose hope that this progress will continue. It should be recognized, however, that human effort alone will never accomplish this task. Our Lord prayed to his Father for unity, and the gift of unity will only come from him. We must continually pray that Christian unity will be strengthened and perfected, and "place all our hope in the prayer of Christ for the Church, in the love of the Father for us, and in the power of the Holy Spirit"³ (CCC 822).

(CCC 605, 817-822, 846-848, 2089)

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² *Unitatis Redintegratio* 3 § 1

³ *Unitatis Redintegratio* 24 § 2