

The XXIX Paul Wattson Lecture

The Quest of Christian Unity

A Vibrant Past with a Bright Future for all Christians

James F. Puglisi, sa

Introduction

It is a great honor to be invited to be apart of a very long tradition here at the University of San Francisco that is the fruit of a collaboration established by one of my predecessors, the V. Rev. Michael Daniel who recently has passed on, and the Jesuits at USF. Fr. Mike, as we called him, was a real part of that quest that I will speak about this evening. He was impassioned by the desire for that unity for which Christ prayed for on the very eve of his departure from this world. For this reason I would like to dedicate this Paul Wattson lecture to his memory and to all of those women and men who have sacrificed much for the sake of Christian unity.

In a particular way, this lecture will recall the long history of the quest for Christian unity which has known many twists and turns. But then again our God has been known as a God writes history not with straight lines (at least according to our perception) but with his own unique intervention in our time. The Hebrew concept of history gives us a hint here since it comes from words (*dabarim*). The philosopher Paul Ricœur in his understanding of religious language says that once we have spoken a sentence it has a life of its own. It is in the re telling of the sentence that it begins to take shape in different ways. The quest that I want to deal with in this lecture is that of the Christian unity. For this reason permit me to begin with a story. We all know that Jesus was a great story teller so I thought it might be appropriate to begin with a story that comes from the Jewish tradition.

“When the great Rabbi Israel Baal Shem Tov, saw misfortune threatening the Jews, it was his custom to go into a certain part of the forest to meditate. There he would light a candle, say a special prayer, and the miracle would be accomplished and misfortune averted.

Later, while his disciple, the celebrated Magid of Mezritch, had occasion for the same reason, to intercede with heaven, he would go to the same place in the forest and say: ‘Master of the Universe, listen! I do not know how to light the fire, but I am still able to say the prayers.’ An again the miracle would be accomplished.

Still later, Rabbi Moshe Leib of Sasov, in order to save his people once more, would go into the forest and say: “I do not know how to light the fire, I do not know the prayer, but I know the -place and this must be sufficient.” It was sufficient, and the miracle was accomplished.

Then it fell to Rabbi Israel of Rizhyn to overcome misfortune. Sitting in his arm chair, his head in his hands, he spoke to God: “I am unable to light the fire and I do not know the prayer; I cannot even find the place in the forest. All I can do is to tell the story, and that must be sufficient.” And it was sufficient. God made humankind because God

loves stories.”¹

There is something amazing about stories like this one. Each one can hear something different but yet it is the same story. Each of us relates to the story in a different way. Each finds a different truth. The story relates to each of us in a way that is unique. In fact each time we recount the story we tell the history of the other as well. What seems to be important here is the fact that at times “all we can do is to tell the story”. This is what I would like to do now.

What is the quest of Christian unity?

We are only a few weeks distant from the celebration of the Week of Prayer for Christian Unity which is celebrated (at least in the Northern hemisphere) from 18 to 25 January each year. This year it was celebrated for the 100th time since its inception in 1908 by Paul James Francis Wattson and his small band of Episcopalian friars and sisters. This week affords us the occasion to tell once again the story of the tragedy of the division of Christians. Not only this but also the steps that have been taken on the path to the healing of division which is a scandal to the Gospel. Some will ask why we should even care about the past. Why not live in the now! Taking this approach ignores the painful past and opens us to the possibility of repeating it once again. We cannot ignore that the source of this quest actually arises from the prayer of Jesus prayed just before his passion. This is recounted in John’s Gospel at the 17th chapter. What I would like to consider in this lecture is a sort of re-telling of the story. However we will look at it from the point of view of a growing, developing vibrant reality opening into a hopeful future that began with those words of Christ: “that they all may be one ... so that the world may believe”.

Situating the development of the Week of Prayer for Christian Unity in its context since the mid 1960's allows us to understand how the prompting of the Holy Spirit has enabled the churches to come out of their isolation from one another and the world in which they live. There is a reality about prayer that one needs to take note of, namely, that when we pray we are changed. The witness of history indicates this in the very evolution of the prayer for Christian unity.

In his classes on ecumenism, Yves Congar used to say to us: “We can pass through the doors of ecumenism only on our knees”. What he meant by this is that we should not delude ourselves into think that we can “make” or “create” the unity of Christians but that unity is itself a gift from the Triune God’s very being; it is a gift to God’s creation especially the Church. Praying was the preparation for the possibility to recognize when this gift is being offered and for “carpe diem”, for the seizing of the opportunity to accept it. This meant that in this prayer we are being changed, transformed slowly, and sometimes painfully, to accept what God wants for us and not what we want. The reality calls for a new vision and a new possibility whereby we can let go of what we “think we are making or creating” and to allow

¹ E. Wiesel, *The Gates of the Forest* (NY: Schocken Books, 1982)

ourselves to be transformed into the very gift that God is offering.

For us to consider what has happened to “prayer for unity” since the Second Vatican Council we need to look at this from a point of view which is not purely historical but theological. For this reason, we will look briefly at a theology of prayer (and specifically prayer for unity), then how a change of “mind set” has gradually been taking place, what the themes of the prayer for unity have been, prayer for unity as the prayer of Christians in common, prayer for unity at the heart of spiritual ecumenism, and finally what the future holds.

A theology of prayer

St. Paul in his letter to the Romans says, “Likewise the Spirit helps us in our weakness; for we do not know how to pray as we ought, but that very Spirit intercedes with sighs too deep for words” (Romans 8:26, *cf.* 1 Corinthians 12:3). Prayer is completely the work of God through Christ in the Holy Spirit. In this we can see that praise and intercession are no merely human works, nor the fulfilment of the creature’s duty to thank or “win over” God. It is the “work of God (*Opus Dei*), God’s communicating with us, effecting salvation and creating life. Prayer comes down from heaven before it returns to God through us, but not without accomplishing that for which God has sent it out (*cf.* Isaiah 55:10f). The Christian’s prayer is a relationship under the covenant between God and us in Christ. It proceeds from the Holy Spirit and from us. This covenanted communion is the attitude of the person who recognizes him/herself as a creature before the Creator. Prayer glorifies the greatness of the Lord, who has created us, and the omnipotence of the Savior, who delivers us from evil.

Prayer is the act by which I adapt myself to the saving will of God. A “request” is not truly a “prayer” unless it is in communion with the will of God as seen in Christ’s demand in the garden: “Abba, Father, for you all things are possible; remove this cup from me; yet, not what I want, but what you want” (Mark 14:36). Pagan prayer seeks to mold the divinity to us while Christian prayer puts oneself in the hands of God who molds us and leads us. This is not a sort of fatalism but rather Christian prayer always seeks to be in communion with the will of God and to cooperate with God’s plan of salvation that surrounds the unfolding of the history of the world. Is not this the very content of the *Lord’s Prayer*, a prayer taught to the disciples as the proper prayer of the Christian community?

If we were to try to define the interior attitude of the person who prays, we would see that it is composed of a desire that things should be this way or that way but subordinated to the sovereign will of God.² Prayer has two poles: on the one hand, the felt need and on the other, the intense desire that it arouses. The person who prays, asks, and at the same time offers him/herself to God so that in and through him/her, the will of God that is always orientated toward the good and salvation be accomplished. In the answering of this prayer (often times in ways not expected by the praying person), God transforms the individual more to the unfolding plan (*mysterion*) of salvation as the prophet Isaiah says: “For my thoughts are not your thoughts, nor are your ways my ways, says the LORD” (Isaiah 55:8).

² See Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologica*, IIa, IIae, q. 83, a. 1.

What should interest us here for our subject is the attitude of Jesus toward prayer and in particular the very prayer of Jesus in the history of salvation. The first aspect of Jesus' prayer that is important for the context of prayer for unity is how God finds in Jesus the will and the heart of a man perfectly in communion with God's will. The relationship of Jesus in loving obedience as son to God's plan of salvation is to be noted throughout his earthly life: "And the one who sent me is with me; he has not left me alone, for I always do what is pleasing to him" (John 8:29). This theme of filial devotion has a dogmatic value that is decisive, namely that the plan of God constitutes in Jesus the perfect reality of the filial relationship of humanity with God and enables all of humanity to now participate in this reality so that in Jesus Christ all are able to say unanimously "Our Father".

The letter to the Hebrews describes the filial relationship of Jesus in terms of loving obedience:

"Consequently, when Christ came into the world, he said, "Sacrifices and offerings you have not desired, but a body you have prepared for me; in burnt offerings and sin offerings you have taken no pleasure. Then I said, 'See, God, I have come to do your will, O God' (in the scroll of the book it is written of me)." When he said above, "You have neither desired nor taken pleasure in sacrifices and offerings and burnt offerings and sin offerings" (these are offered according to the law), then he added, "See, I have come to do your will." He abolishes the first in order to establish the second. And it is by God's will that we have been sanctified through the offering of the body of Jesus Christ once for all" (Hebrews 10:5-10).

The fulfilment of the Scriptures relates to the fact of Christ's passion to the combat concerning the kingdom of God.³ It is knowing that Jesus' hour has come that he hastens to its fulfilment in obedience: "I will no longer talk much with you, for the ruler of this world is coming. He has no power over me; but I do as the Father has commanded me, so that the world may know that I love the Father. Rise, let us be on our way" (John 14:30-31).

It is in Jesus then that there exists human consciousness and freedom that are offered to God so that his salvific will could perfectly be deployed in the world. It is the birth pangs of all of creation that awaits full redemption (*cf.* Romans 8:22-25) that passes through the consciousness and the prayer of the First born of all creation, the Principle, the First born from the dead (Colossians 1:15, 18). He is our unique priest and great celebrant of the world. It is in his sacrificed body, the unique temple (John 2:18-22) that we must enter to pray. Here is where Jesus finds his glory, in that loving filial obedience. His glory is not the fragile, superficial glory of humanity, marked by flattering appreciation of other women and men but it is the approval that the servant-Son finds in the Father⁴ and this is in the strict sense, the "glory of

³ See Y. Congar, *Jésus-Christ: notre médiateur, notre Seigneur* (Paris: Cerf, 1965) 84.

⁴ John's gospel underscores this fact, see for example, Jn 5:44; 7:18; 8:54.

the only son" (John 1:14. 18). This is the reason why John realizes that Jesus sees this glory when his Passion begins.

The way the Gospels look at the prayer of Jesus is with a certain precision in terms of the object of his requests. What interests us in particular is how the Gospel of John speaks about the object of Jesus' prayer in terms of his own glorification or for the disciples or the Church. The Johannine vision of the work of Jesus makes clear the reasons for which Jesus was sent. The key moments expressed are seen in the images utilized such as the grain that must die to be reborn in the harvest. It is also the testament of Jesus expressed by what he will do in his own flesh and that which will be accomplished in his body formed of the faithful. All of this is expressed under the form of prayer, namely the desire or wish expressed in the condition of submission to the Other whose decision is sovereign. In this, the prayer of Jesus is perfectly in conformity to the plan of salvation of God and hence it is always answered: "I knew that you always hear me, but I have said this for the sake of the crowd standing here, so that they may believe that you sent me" (John 11:42).

The prayer that is traditionally cited as being Christ's prayer for unity (John 17:11. 20-23) poses some questions as to whether it is applicable to the division and reunion of Christians or simply to the Church and its members. In the latter instance the question of the extension of the Church would have to be raised⁵. No matter the response to this question that the exegete may give, this question is ecclesiastically and theologically resolved for us by the usage that is made of this text in an ecumenical context. Even though the prayer of Jesus for the unity of his followers was said only once, it still remains current not only by the fact that the glorified Lord always intercedes for us (Hebrews 7:25) but by the fact that from heaven where he sits at the right hand of God, he completes that which he did, said and suffered for our salvation while he was on earth.

How then does our prayer for unity relate to Jesus' prayer for unity? It follows the model that says that what is done in the Church and is an exercise, an actualization of that which was announced or instituted in the constitutive period of the history of the People of God. The Decree on ecumenism, *Unitatis redintegratio* presents the prayer for unity as the act "to have frequent recourse to that prayer for the unity of the Church which the Savior himself on the eve of his death so fervently appealed to his Father: "That they may all be one" (John 17:21)⁶. When we pray this prayer we pray for unity in the power of the prayer of the Lord that we actualize in history. A history which is that of the Church in its fidelity and its continuity but also a history of the People of God in its faults, its limits, its darkness and failures: the history of our divisions. On the subject of divisions, St. Paul uses the verb "there has to be", indicating by that their place in the concrete plan of salvation (1 Corinthians 11:19)⁷. It is at the juncture of our divisions, on the one side, and of

⁵ See the issues that have once again be raised in the statement of the Congregation of the Doctrine of the Faith (July 10, 2007) concerning the extension of the word Church to other ecclesial communities.

⁶ UR 8.

⁷ See Y. Congar, "Les ruptures de l'unité" 10, 2-3 *Istina* (1964) 164f.

ecumenism, on the other, of drama and promise, of sin and grace, of repentance and hope that we realize the prayer of the Lord for the unity of his disciples. Rather it is better to say that the Holy Spirit actualizes in us the prayer of the Lord because it is He who prays in us (Cf. Romans 8:15. 25; Galatians 4:6; 1 Corinthians 12:3).

When we pray the prayer of Christ for unity we are transformed and unified by it. This happens not only by those practicing it but also within each one. The prayer for unity, as is true for all prayer, is situated under the influence of the Spirit of God who blows wherever he wills and who forcefully nudges us to partake of the profound life of the Church and of souls in the search for God. If it is a question of the renewal of the Church and of the conversion of heart (UR 6 and 7), then the prayer for unity, above all done together, will attain a certain level of truth and profundity. It is in this context that one may begin to speak of a change of mind set from one where we are all estranged from one another to one that requires a communion of mind and heart, namely with that of Christ himself.

A change of “mind set”

In the twentieth century there were two major thrusts in movements of prayer for the unity of Christians. One began in 1908 by Paul James Francis Wattson, SA (1863-1940) the co-founder of the Society of the Atonement with Lurana Mary Francis White, SA. The other by a French catholic priest from Lyons, Paul Couturier (1881-1953) in 1935. However, before considering these let us look briefly at what preceded them.

Attitudes of prayer for unity

Prayers were always offered for Christian unity within the church. All of the official liturgies of the ancient churches of the East and the West contained prayers for unity usually concerning their communion within the same ecclesial body. Later on, prayer dedicated to the Holy Spirit's role in bringing about the unity and renewal of Christians may be noted in the writings of several influential individuals.⁸ Perhaps the first formal proposal for united prayer was made by an Anglican priest, Ignatius Spencer in 1840. It seems that there was considerable discussion among some of the members of the Oxford movement on this issue. Key actors involved John Henry Newman and Edward Pusey. However, there was not much enthusiasm showed for this “union of prayer for unity” that Spencer proposed even though a plan for united prayer was eventually drafted. It found limited use among Anglicans at that time.

Perhaps the very first organized group founded to pray for the unity of Christians was the Association for the Promotion of the Unity of Christendom

⁸ Some of these who were influenced by a renewal movement begun in Scotland in the 1740's include Jonathan Edwards (1705-1758) and James Stewart who wrote the influential *Hints for a General Union of Christians for Prayer for the Outpouring of the Holy Spirit*. The ideas contained in this work would later bear fruit in the Evangelical Alliance's Week of Prayer begun in 1846 whose purpose was to have Christians prayer for the outpouring of the Spirit for revival and renewal during the first calendar week of each year. For this information, see the work of R. Mercer, *What is this 'Week of Prayer for Christian Unity'?* (London: SPCK/CTS, [1977]) 2f.

(APUC) in 1857. It was ecumenical in its make up consisting of Frederick G. Lee (Anglican), Ambrose Phillips de Lisle and A.W. Pugin (Catholics) and in its intention to have Catholics, Orthodox and Anglicans united in a 'bond of intercessory prayer'. The purpose of the APUC was to have "united prayer that visible unity may be restored to Christendom". In 1864, however, the Holy See forbade Catholics to take any part in this association.

Just about this same time the first Lambeth Conference of the Anglican Communion met (1867). This and all subsequent conferences stressed the need for prayer for the unity of the church. Interestingly enough two key times were stressed as having a particular importance for praying for unity, namely Ascension Day and Whitsunday.

In Catholic circles at the end of the nineteenth century, Pope Leo XIII (1878-1903) was concerned about the unity of Christians. In 1894, he encouraged Catholics to pray the rosary for the intention of Christian unity. One of his concerns was also in regards to unity with Eastern Christians. Hence in a letter *Provida Matris* (1895) he indicated the use of the novena (nine days of prayers) in preparation of the feast of Pentecost as a time particularly opportune for praying for unity especially for the reunion of Christendom. This plea was repeated in his later encyclical *Divinum illud munus* (1897) on the Holy Spirit where he suggested that the days between Ascension and Pentecost should be devoted to prayer "for the reconciliation with our separated brethren".⁹ The two liturgical feasts of Ascension and Pentecost were identified by both Anglican and Roman authorities as being ideal times of prayer for unity.

What may be seen in these diverse appeals for prayer for Christian unity is that there was a certain "mind set" that drove each of these projects. Usually it was either a logic that desired prayer for unity within a certain denominational or confessional body and, in the case of Catholics, a rejoining or return of those who separated from the Roman church. A certain "apologetic" approach may be perceived as being the mind set in place during this period while the churches remained in a certain "blissful" separation from each other - each one believing that it alone was the authentic, true church. One important piece was missing from these positions, namely the ultimate reason for the unity of Christians was mission. At the beginning of the twentieth century we see that the missionary appeal comes to the fore with critical force. This is particularly evidenced in the famous Edinburgh meeting of the World Missionary Conference in 1910 and followed up with the foundation of the International Missionary Council in 1921. These two important events brought the scandalous divisions among Christians before the world stage. This, added to two major world conflicts, will eventually jolt the churches from their entrenched positions to one of realizing that the Christian vocation has something to do not with myopic concerns but with the salvation of the whole world.

⁹ R.F. Esposito, *Leone XIII e l'Oriente Cristiano* (Rome: Ed. Paoline, 1960) 457. For commentary on these texts see also C. Boyer & D. Bellucci (eds.), *Unità cristiana e movimento ecumenico* (Rome: Studium, 1963) 31 ff.

A new mind set

Wattson, an Episcopalian Franciscan together with another Anglican priest Spencer Jones launched the idea of prayer for unity with Rome. Fr. Jones preferred the feast of Sts. Peter and Paul, 29th of June. Wattson, however, desired more than a single day dedicated to prayer for unity. He kept the idea of linking it to a commemoration of St. Peter, the feast of the Chair of Peter then celebrated on the 18th of January. In addition, he added another dimension, the missionary one to the understanding of a center of unity. Realizing that the 29th of June was not only the feast of Peter but also of Paul, Wattson saw and realized the very meaning of John 17: "that they all may be one... so that the world may believe" was in the purpose of the unity that Christ prayed for, namely in the mission of the church to bring the Good News of salvation to all peoples seen in the mission of the apostle Paul to the Gentiles.¹⁰

This change in mind set is extremely important for the later development that will take place. Up until now, prayer for unity had been conceived of as a call for return to the Mother Church or for unity within one's own church. Here the Spirit was beginning to work a change in attitude. The circle was beginning to widen, even if so little, so as to invite members of other churches to pray a common prayer for full unity. This will come to greater fulfilment with the contribution of Abbé Paul Couturier as the *Chair of Unity Octave* will eventually become a *Universal Week of Prayer for Christian Unity* in 1935.

While Wattson emphasized unity with the Roman church he nevertheless had a particular way of expressing his vision. It was a unity which was seen as being "around the chair of Peter" and not in submission to it. He believed in reunion but with this understanding of seeing a composite type of unity which did not eliminate all diversity. Unfortunately, once the community of Wattson entered into full communion with the Church of Rome and with the absence of an ecclesiology of Rome that allowed this vision, a "unionist" position quickly developed since this new community would be under suspect both from the church that it left and from the church it joined! Cardinal Jan Willebrands, in a homily preached during the 75th anniversary of the founding of the Society of the Atonement, made the assertion that Wattson's vision was that of the ancient church and anticipated that of the Malines conferences which expressed Anglican unity with Rome as "united but not absorbed".

Earlier in the same century there were other movements of prayer that had as their goal the unity of Christians. In the forefront of these was the Protestant

¹⁰ In a quote from D. GANNON, *Father Paul of Graymoor* (NY: Macmillan Co., 1951) 260: we learn that Wattson related the choice of the dates for his Octave to some theological concepts when he explained why he proposed eight days for prayer for unity rather than just one: "The fitness of an Octave beginning with a festival in honor of what God himself has constituted the Centre of Catholic Unity, viz., The Chair of Peter, and ending with the feast of the Conversion of the great Apostle to the Gentiles (...). When the Founder of Christianity prayed for the Unity of His disciples, the reason He gave was 'That the world might believe.' We are, therefore, to begin with Unity that we may end in the Conversion of the whole of world - The Chair of Peter stands for the first; St. Paul, the missionary convert, stands for the latter."

Episcopal Church in the United States which printed a Manual of Prayers for Christian Unity. While these prayers were destined for everyone it was not anticipated that Christians would physically pray together but that they would each in their own places pray for unity. The scope was to provide for those churches which did not have a liturgical tradition of prayers that they could use.

Likewise in other Protestant circles there were new proposals for prayer for unity. Developments may be found in the newly formed Faith and Order Movement. In view of the first world conference on Faith and Order material was prepared for a week of prayer for church unity that was to be held during the week preceding Pentecost in 1921. This week was to be held each year and was participated in by Orthodox, Anglican and Protestants. The WCC's commission on Faith and Order will later suggest in 1941 that this week be moved to January to coincide with the Catholic Octave.¹¹

A further development or change in mind set took place in the 1930's. While the Church of Unity Octave was spreading rapidly especially among Catholics in England, Ireland, Scotland, Belgium, France, Poland, Italy and the United States thanks to official recognition first for the United States by Pope Pius X and then extended universally by Pope Benedict XV with the Brief *Ad perpetuam rei memoriam* (Feb. 25, 1916), in 1932 during a retreat in what is today the Benedictine monastery of Chevetogne, Abbé Paul Couturier prayed over the writings of Dom Lambert Beauduin (1873-1960) and Cardinal Mercier. Couturier was convinced of the need to pray for Christian unity but he was not convinced that the intentions of the Octave allowed others to pray for their return to the Church of Rome, *tout court*. For the first time in 1933 in the chapel of the Assumptionist Sisters in Lyons, he celebrated a reduced form of the Octave, a sort of *triduum* from January 20-22 for the "return of Christians separated from the unity of the Church". It wasn't until 1935 that he expanded his perspective with Orthodox coming to pray together with Catholics as well as inviting other Christians (and non Christians!) to give lectures on the occasion of these prayer meetings. At the same time he dropped the use of the work "octave" for what he now called the "Universal Week of Prayer for Christian Unity". Couturier always recognized that he was not the originator of this week of prayer but rather the one who broadened it in such a way that others might be able to participate in it.¹² While he based the psychology of this prayer of Christ on John's Gospel he understood that to mean that we prayed for : "*L'Unité que Tu veux par les moyens que Tu voudras*". This is the prayer that we must pray not that others may be converted to us, but that we may all be drawn closer to Christ.

As we saw above, there was also a series of prayers proposed by the Faith and

¹¹ Information from the archives of the Faith and Order Commission cited by D. HELLER, "The Soul of the Ecumenical Movement. The History and Significance of the Week of Prayer for Christian Unity," *The Ecumenical Review* 50, 3 (1998) 404, n. 5.

¹² It should be noted that in 1949 the Sacred Congregation of the Holy Office issued *Ecclesia Catholica*, "Instruction to Local Ordinaries on the Ecumenical Movement" that attributed the movement toward unity to be the work of the Holy Spirit. It will be another decade and a half before the Catholic church officially enters the ecumenical movement at the Second Vatican Council.

Order Movement which went from Ascension to Pentecost. As the Universal Week of prayer began to catch on in Protestant circles as well as Catholic circles, the Commission realized that it made sense to move its week to coincide with the time of the two weeks that were proposed by Catholics, namely that of Wattson and of Couturier. Hence in 1941 the dates were changed and from 1958 onwards the material was prepared in collaboration with the Ecumenical Centre "Unité Chrétienne" of Lyons.

With the event of the Second Vatican Council a new era dawned that was driven by a new mind set. With no. 8 of *Unitatis Redintegratio* this new mind set is articulated thus: "it is allowable, indeed desirable that Catholics should join in prayer with their separated brethren". At least for the Catholic church there was a new spirit and attitude not only toward praying together for unity but also toward the goal of that prayer, namely the unity of Christians for the sake of the mission of the one Church of Christ. In addition to prayers for unity within the Catholic church the Council now establishes the desirability of prayers together, *in common* for the unity of Christians. The rationale for this is cited from the biblical context of Matthew's Gospel (18:19f): "Again, truly I tell you, if two of you agree on earth about anything you ask, it will be done for you by my Father in heaven. For where two or three are gathered in my name, I am there among them." The efficacy of this prayer then is seen in the concordance of wills and hence the reason for *praying together*.

In addition the Council gives more theological and pastoral reasons for sustaining praying together for unity. In the Dogmatic Constitution on the Church, *Lumen Gentium*, the Council affirms the why Catholics and other Christians can pray together. These reasons are multiple as the Constitution declares: "The Church recognizes that in many ways she is linked with those who, being baptized, are honored with the name of Christian, though they do not profess the faith in its entirety or do not preserve unity of communion with the Successor of Peter".¹³ The many reasons for this are listed which include: Sacred Scripture, veneration of the Trinity and faith in Christ, the Son of God and Savior, baptism and other sacraments, the episcopate, the Holy Eucharist and devotion toward the Virgin Mother of God. Finally there is a recognition that in spite of our divisions we can join in prayer and spiritual benefits and that "in some real way they are joined with us in the Holy Spirit, for to them too he gives his gifts and graces whereby he is operative among them with his sanctifying power. Some indeed he has strengthened to the extent of the shedding of their blood" (LG 15).

In the years following the Second Vatican Council, many initiatives have taken place in common prayer in all Churches and ecclesial communities. It is sufficient to name only some of these to show how diverse and many they are. There is the women's prayer movement which is completely ecumenical that has brought women together not only from diverse ecclesial contexts but from diverse cultural and ethnical backgrounds. Various youth organizations such as the YMCA and YWCA have promoted common prayer and prayer for unity as well as the

¹³ LG 15.

international youth days begun under the pontificate of John Paul II. Peace movements and churches that are known as “peace churches” such the Mennonites have promoted prayer in common as have many aboriginal groups that have sustained common prayer in an ecological or creational context. In particular we also mention religious groups like the Franciscans or Benedictines¹⁴ who are not only found within one church but whose movement and prayer forms cross ecclesial boundaries. Finally, we cannot overlook several groups in particular, the ecumenical religious communities of Taizé, Bose, Grandchamp, l’Arche who have promoted an ecumenical spirituality based on prayer in common for the unity of Christians. All of these examples illustrate a change in mind set that has taken place thanks to an awareness of praying Christ’s prayer for unity in common has transformed those who pray for unity into those who live unity in the Spirit.

The themes of the prayer for unity

From an understanding of how prayer works within the human soul to seeing how a change in mind set has been effected by the prayer for unity itself, we may turn our attention to look at some of the themes that have been proposed in the past for the Week of Prayer for Christian Unity. The mind set changed from a praying for a *conversion from one flock to another* to praying for a *deeper conversion to Christ*, the true shepherd of the whole flock.

The daily intentions originally proposed for the Church Unity Octave remained fairly unchanged from its inception having the intent to pray for the corporate re-union of separated Christians to the Holy See. These intentions included the following: the return of ‘other sheep’ to the fold, the return of Oriental separatists, the submission of Anglicans, that Lutherans and Continental Protestants find their way back to the Holy Church, that Christians in America become one in union with the Chair of St. Peter, the return to the sacraments of lapsed Catholics, the conversion of the Jews, and the missionary conquest of the world.

While the purpose of Wattson’s Octave was to pray for the reunion of others to reconstitute unity with the see of Peter, Couturier’s general theme was “unity that Christ wills, as he wills, and when he wills”. His first scheme made the following suggested intentions for each day: unity of all Christians, sanctification of Catholics, of Orthodox, of Anglicans, of Lutherans, of Calvinists, of all other Protestant Christians, and the unity of all humanity in the charity and truth of Christ. A second scheme proposed in 1946 will add the sanctification of the Jews and the sanctification of all other non-Christians (especially Muslims from 1953) which replaces the sanctification of Lutherans and Calvinists which were grouped together under “all other Protestant Christians”¹⁵. It is interesting to see how the interreligious themes

¹⁴ In his letter *Equidem Verba* of March 21, 1924, Pope Pius XI encouraged the Benedictines to pray for Christian unity which led to the founding of the monastery at Amay-sur-Meuse in 1925 which moved to Chevetogne in 1939. Their purpose was to help establish relations between Catholics and Orthodox. In addition there are Benedictines who are members of the Anglican Communion just as there are Franciscans who are Anglicans.

¹⁵ See M. WOODRUFF, “Paul Couturier, the Week of Prayer, and the Unity of Humanity in Christ”, in M. WOODRUFF (ed.), *The Unity of Christians: The Vision of Paul Couturier* (Oxford: The

became mixed in with the ecumenical or purely intra Christian relations.

From the time of Paul Couturier's *triduum* until around 1943 there were no specific themes for the week but rather an explanation of what is the prayer for unity. However starting in 1943 there were biblical themes that were being indicated. Some of these themes included: "that they all may be one"; "by making peace through the blood of his cross"; "the walls of separation do not rise to heaven"; "united before the cross", "Orthodox and Protestants, Anglicans and Catholics speak to Christ the Redeemer recognizing their love and sorrowfully repenting their separation"; "the love of Christ urges us on"; "Jesus, Savior of all"; "now in Christ Jesus you who once were far off have been brought near by the blood of Christ. ...He has abolished the wall of separation, thus making peace, ... through the cross, thus putting to death that hostility"; "that they may be one as we are one"; "one flock, one shepherd"; "Christ our hope - and I, when I am lifted up from the earth, will draw all people to myself"; "in Christ who prays"; "the suffering of separations is in the Prayer for Unity"; "the one who loves his brother lives in light".

Between 1959 and 1967 themes were developed in conjunction with the Faith and Order Commission of the WCC. These included: "be guided by the Spirit"; "here is my servant"; "I am the light of the world"; "I am among you as one who serves"; "He is our peace"; "great shepherd of the sheep"; "behold, I am making all things new"; "I will be their God and they will be my people"; "called to one hope".

With greater collaboration between the WCC and the Catholic church after the Second Vatican Council, the Week of Prayer for Christian Unity has been planned and is now jointly printed by the Faith and Order Commission and the Pontifical Council for Promoting Christian Unity. Local groups are invited each year to prepare a suggested theme and develop it. It is then given to an international ecumenical group that refines the theme. The joint publication is then sent out to the constituent members of the WCC and the Catholic church for local adaptation and distribution. Of the 41 themes chosen since 1968, all but three have been New Testament texts with the three texts being taken from the Psalms. Overall the emphasis focuses on some dimension of the biblical understanding of unity within the Trinity and our relationship with one another as being made in the image of this "life in communion" with the Trinity. There is always an affirmation that the Church of Christ is one but Christians who are divided from one another need to seek that unity desired by Christ.

The prayer for unity as the prayer of Christians in common

Great progress has been made during the past century. There has been a move from a state where churches did not speak to one another and lived in isolation from each other to the degree that one might describe the ecclesiastical situation as one of open competition and conflict to a state where churches now collaborate together in the Gospel project. There has always been "prayer for unity" in the life of the churches but the understanding of the meaning of this prayer has changed. Formerly churches prayer for the unity of the church apart from each

Catholic League, 2005) 141f.

other. Now Christians pray in common for the unity willed by Christ. This prayer is necessary since it is the way the Spirit is preparing us to receive that very unity for which we pray.

Unity is a gift from the Triune God whose very existence is one. The churches deceive themselves if they believe that we are creating unity or making unity. The united church is not some mega church that women and men are constructing much like the tower of Babel. Rather Christians, in their prayer in common, are learning that very unity that the Spirit is gifting us with. No one knows what the united church will look like except that there will be something of each of us in it. One thing that we do know is that we need to be prepared to accept the gift of unity from God when we are prepared to receive it. Much like the Apostles on that Pentecost day were surprised by the workings of the Spirit in them, we, too, must be prepared to be surprised by the Spirit and overwhelmed by the Spirit's promptings. We need to remember that they were blockaded behind door for fear and it was the Spirit who unlocked the doors for them to boldly proclaim what God has done. This was the beginning of realization of the Gospel mission. This is where the experience of Babel was reversed. The Gospel project then is the continuation of the Church's undoing of Babel in the world today.

The prayer for unity at the heart of the ecumenical movement

"There can be no ecumenism worthy of the name without a change of heart" (UR 7). This change of heart has been exemplified first and foremost by the change that has occurred in the way that Christians pray for unity. When one has prayed with others no one remains the same. The nature of our prayer for unity has changed. Instead of praying apart we now have prayer in common. In an historic consultation between the then Secretariat for Promoting Christian Unity and the WCC's Commission on Faith and Order in October 1966 there was complete agreement that prayer in common for Christian unity was not only feasible but that it should be jointly planned by both organizations.¹⁶ Until that moment various ecumenical centers were preparing the materials for the Week of Prayer. From an historical point of view it was recognized that Christians prayed for unity for eight days in January was due to Paul Wattson, founder of the Chair of Unity Octave and that all Christians are now able to pray together in a common, universal, Week of Prayer was due to Abbé Paul Couturier.

The concrete results of the Second Vatican Council has enabled Catholic Christians to be more actively engaged in common prayer and has recommended their full and active participation in the activity of common prayer. This has been considered by many to have become the heart of spiritual ecumenism. The *Ecumenical Directory* speaks of the heart of the ecumenical movement in this way:

In the ecumenical movement it is necessary to give priority to conversion of heart, spiritual life and its renewal. "This change of heart

¹⁶ Cf. "Prayer for Unity", The Report of the Consultation on 'The Future of the Week of Prayer for Christian Unity', Geneva, October 1966" *One in Christ* 3, 3 (1967) 251-261.

and holiness of life, along with public and private prayer for the unity of Christians, should be regarded as the soul of the whole ecumenical movement and can rightly be called 'spiritual ecumenism.'" Individual Christians, therefore, insofar as they live a genuine spiritual life with Christ the Savior as its center and the glory of God the Father as its goal, can always and everywhere share deeply in the ecumenical movement, witnessing to the Gospel of Christ with their lives.¹⁷

John Paul II in following the line of the Council and the *Ecumenical Directory* speaks of the "primacy of prayer." For him this primacy was expressed on many occasions during his ecumenical pilgrimages and at St. Peter's itself where his experience of prayer in common or "ecumenical prayer" with Christians separated from one another was a source of hope:

"Ecumenical" prayer, as the prayer of brothers and sisters, expresses all this. Precisely because they are separated from one another, they meet in Christ with all the more hope, entrusting to him the future of their unity and their communion. Here too we can appropriately apply the teaching of the Council: "The Lord Jesus, when he prayed to the Father 'that all may be one...as we are one' (Jn 17:21-22), opened up vistas closed to human reason. For he implied a certain likeness between the union of the Divine Persons, and the union of God's children in truth and charity." (UR 4)

The change of heart which is the essential condition for every authentic search for unity flows from prayer and its realization is guided by prayer.¹⁸

To conclude then we are able to affirm that over the past hundred years we have seen tremendous strides made in the recovery of fraternal relations among Christians even if the ultimate goal of full visible unity has not yet been achieved. There is a totally new atmosphere of collaboration, of sharing, of common witness not only in words but in deeds that encompass areas of social justice, freedom, human rights and peace.

What the future holds

After looking at the this vibrant past let us turn our attention to what is in store as we go forward into the future. Ecumenical dialogues that have started in earnest after the Second Vatican Council have had the principle of starting from a

¹⁷ Pontifical Council for Promoting Christian Unity, *Directory for the Application of Principles and Norms on Ecumenism* (Washington, DC: USCCB Publications, 1983) par. 63.

¹⁸ John Paul II, *Ut unum sint. On Commitment to Ecumenism* (Washington, DC: USCCB Publications, 1995) par. 26. On the many experiences of ecumenical prayer celebrated by the Bishop of Rome, see G. VIVIANI, "The Ecumenical Liturgies Celebrated by the Holy Father in Rome and in the World: 'The common prayer with our brothers and sisters who seek unity in Christ and in his Church' (Ut Unum Sint, 24)" 147-198 in J.F. PUGLISI (ed.), *Liturgical Renewal as a Way to Christian Unity* (Collegeville: Liturgical Press, 2005)

confirmation of what we have in common so as to build a strong foundation to deal with the issues that deeply divide us. These dialogues have gone a long way in clarifying and making more explicit what it is that unites us. As the churches focus more and more on the thorny issues which indeed do divide us we will need to stop and meditate in common prayer on the unity that we already have so as to be able to continue the dialogue on those issues which still divide us.¹⁹ We have reached that stage of the dialogue where such issues as the understanding of the doctrine of the church must be discussed.²⁰ In a certain respect all of the dialogues have been preparing for dealing with these issues as a final resolution of what still separates us as Christians. This is one of the reasons why prayer for unity is so essential and necessary as we go forward. Since many of the issues which the churches will discuss today touch on the very heart of what it means to be church we will need to be centered in prayer, in discerning **together** what is the will of the Lord for us today. This can only be done when we can put on the mind of Jesus who prays in us with his Spirit for that unity which God desires for all of humanity.

This means that discussions whether the Week of Prayer for Christian Unity takes place in January or preceding Pentecost are not important. What appears to be more important now is that just a week is not enough! Our common prayer for unity must become a daily exercise even a spiritual discipline. This prayer for unity must now become an integrated part of our spirituality. By our baptism, we take on the commitment to seek the unity that God wills for God's people. If we are truly to be made over in God's image and likeness then our unity as Christians must be an essential element of our identity.

The Apostles, when having to confront the first major crisis of whether or not non Jews could indeed become Christ's followers without accepting all of the prescriptions of Judaism, they came up with a solution, a way forward, which has been cited more recently in our ecumenical discussions: of placing no burden greater than what the Gospel requires (*cf.* Acts 15:28).²¹ Isn't it time then that we, like those first Apostles and elders, had a serious discussion on what are burdens "greater than

¹⁹ See the article of A. DULLES, "Saving Ecumenism from Itself," *First Things* (2007) 23-27

²⁰ For example, see the issues raised by the CONGREGATION FOR THE DOCTRINE OF THE FAITH, "Responses to Some Questions Regarding Certain Aspects of the Doctrine on the Church", issued 10 July 2007. Reaction and explanation of this text was immediate which shows how sensitive the issues are. For example, see the commentary of J. WICKS, "Questions and Answers on the New Responses of the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith" *Ecumenical Trends* (2007) 36, 7 (2007)1/97-7/103, 15/111-16/112 which places this text in the context of other more important magisterial texts (Council Decrees and Encyclicals) as well as lower level texts issued by Dicasteries of the Holy See. One of the central points revolves around the definition of the Catholic church in relation to the Church of Christ. This section of the document needs to be read together with the comments previously made by Cardinal Jan WILLEBRANDS, "Vatican II's Ecclesiology of Communion", *Origins* 17, 2 (1987) 27-33 and *One in Christ* 23, 3 (1987) and F. SULLIVAN, "'Subsistit in': The Significance of Vatican II's Decision to Say of the Church of Christ not that it 'is' but that it 'subsists in' the Roman Catholic Church", *One in Christ* 22, 2 (1986)115-123.

²¹ See, JOHN PAUL II, *Ut unum sint*, ..., *op. cit.*, par. 78.

the Gospel requires"? This can only be done in the context of prayer for unity. For just as those Apostles realized their solution together with the Holy Spirit, together we must discern what it is that the Gospel requires of us in and through the Holy Spirit who prays through us.

Now, more than any other period in the history of the Church, is this prayer for unity necessary. Christians are facing new challenges of how to live concretely their faith in the world. New problems, new divisions within the same church are appearing. What can we do? How shall we find a way forward?

These are the new challenges that the Churches are facing. Yet if we sincerely believe that the ecumenical movement is a work initiated by the Holy Spirit then we need to believe that the same Spirit will bring it to fulfillment. Hence we are at a critical point in our ecumenical pilgrimage. We are obliged to go deeper in our conversion to Christ that is both personal and collective. What we do not need at this time are new methods, or strategies nor new paradigms and so forth. What is needed is a new spiritual impetus. Looking back over the past find, we have seen that the key figures in the modern day ecumenical movement were women and men of deep contemplation and prayer. Their insights came from prayer from that authentic listening to the world of God and being transformed by it. Walter Kasper says this about prayer and the future ahead of us:

"Prayer for unity is the royal door of ecumenism; it leads Christians to look at the kingdom of God and the unity of the Church in a fresh way; it deepens their bonds of communion, and it enables them to courageously face painful memories, social burden and human weakness. In every age of history the principal artisans of reconciliation and unity were persons of prayer and contemplation, inspiring divided Christians to recommit themselves to walk the path of unity."²²

Let us not forget that the modern ecumenical movement really began in the space between the two great wars of last century as a ray of hope for Christiana that reconciliation is indeed possible and even necessary. Again Kasper, in a recent lecture in Rome, noted that "the ecumenical movement did and does not start from an ecclesiological and dogmatic relativism and liberalism, which no longer cares about the different Church traditions. On the contrary, spiritual ecumenism suffers from the wounds caused by the divisions within the Church, divisions from which the Church bleeds. Thus it is reminding the churches not to withdraw into a confessional self-sufficiency but to undertake courageously all possible and responsible steps to promote Christian unity. Spiritual ecumenism will therefore be an examination of conscience, in the existing reality of the Church, always thinking ahead prophetically."²³

²² W. KASPER, *A Handbook for Spiritual Ecumenism* (Hyde Park, NY: New City Press, 2007) 11.

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W. KASPER, "The Week of Prayer for Christian Unity - Origin and Continuing Inspiration of the Ecumenical Movement", Conference given at the Centro Pro Unione, Rome, 24 January 2008, unpublished manuscript.

What we have learned in this last half of a century is that each of the churches has received gifts from God and that the ecumenical movement has become a movement where we learn to share the gifts that each has received.²⁴ This means that as we go forward we need to seek deeper ways of sharing these gifts, of discerning the spirits that have been given not for the tearing down but for the building up. The aim of the ecumenical movement is not to find the lowest common denominator but rather it is to find the spiritual enrichment that God has gifted each church. In ecumenical dialogue we discover the truth of the other as our own truth. So through the ecumenical dialogue the Spirit leads us into the whole truth; he heals the wounds of our divisions and bestows us with full catholicity.

In a certain respect then the context within which Jesus offered that first prayer for unity is not so different from ours today:

I have given them your word, and the world has hated them because they do not belong to the world, just as I do not belong to the world. I am not asking you to take them out of the world, but I ask you to protect them from the evil one. They do not belong to the world, just as I do not belong to the world. Sanctify them in the truth; your word is truth. As you have sent me into the world, so I have sent them into the world. And for their sakes I sanctify myself, so that they also may be sanctified in truth. "I ask not only on behalf of these, but also on behalf of those who will believe in me through their word, that they may all be one. As you, Father, are in me and I am in you, may they also be in us, so that the world may believe that you have sent me. The glory that you have given me I have given them, so that they may be one, as we are one, I in them and you in me, that they may become completely one, so that the world may know that you have sent me and have loved them even as you have loved me. Father, I desire that those also, whom you have given me, may be with me where I am, to see my glory, which you have given me because you loved me before the foundation of the world. "Righteous Father, the world does not know you, but I know you; and these know that you have sent me. I made your name known to them, and I will make it known, so that the love with which you have loved me may be in them, and I in them." (John 17:14-26)

This prayer for unity needs to be situated theologically within the type of "*communicatio in sacris*" that is neither sacramental nor liturgical. Paul VI in speaking about the mystery of the Church says:

Even before it takes historical shape, the Church is one in God's plan that Christ has begun in the Gospel and that he goes about unfolding in time, and resolving in the mysterious kingdom of the after-life. It is one because it is His Church, and it is one because it is the object of its redemptive mission

²⁴ JOHN PAUL II, *Ut unum sint*, 28.

that, according to Christ's supreme prayer, aims at making us all one: *ut unum sint* (Jn 17:21).²⁵

²⁵ Cited by T. CRANNY, *John 17: As We are One* (Peekskill, NY: Graymoor Press, 1965) 90.