Seamlessness and diversity

You have heard it said that a stitch in time saves nine. I know how to thread a needle and have done so many times. I have even sewn a button on my shirt and on occasion sat at a sewing machine, but a tailor I am not.

When presented with the image of a seamless garment, it is difficult to imagine the finished product, especially if it is a seamless robe. In the crucifixion scene, at the foot of the cross, the soldiers are said to have rolled dice for the seamless robe of Jesus. This is an indication that His garment was of some real value, despite its dirtied and blood-stained condition following the journey to Calvary.

The image of the seamless robe of Jesus comes to mind as we celebrate the Week of Prayer for Christian Unity, Jan. 18-25. This special week was initiated by the Rev. Paul Wattson, founder of the Franciscan Friars of the Atonement, in 1898, while he was an Episcopal priest in the United States. Wattson eventually became a Roman Catholic and brought with him the practice of the Week of Prayer for Christian Unity, which is dedicated to drawing the many seams of the Christian Church into a seamless whole.

The present state of Christianity is hardly seamless. It is more of a patchwork quilt. Some might describe it as unity in diversity, as spoken in the ecumenical vocabulary of today. But most Christians, I believe, would not be inclined to agree with that ecumenical image.

The common quest for unity, or seamlessness, is not a search for uniformity. The seamlessness we seek might well be summed up in the words of Pope Francis. Addressing the Catholic Fraternity of Charismatics in Rome last October, he told his audience to seek the unity that is of the work of the Holy Spirit and do not be afraid of diversity.

Think of a married couple. Why is it that opposites often attract and create a genuine bond of true intimacy, united in seamless love? Neither partner is asked to surrender or compromise their personality. Being equal does not mean being identical.

Consciously aware of the need to include all people in the ecumenical task, Pope Francis does not believe the first ecumenical objective should be to reach agreement on theological statements. Instead, Francis says we first participate together in prayer and works of charity.

Building the unity of the Church is the work of the whole Church. Every Christian is called to be an active participant. Ecumenical action cannot be limited to the Roman Catholic Church, but is the prerogative of all Christian Churches and ecclesial communities. All are called to allow themselves to be guided by the Holy Spirit, remaining open, docile and obedient.

A divided Church is a weaker Church and is a scandal to the Gospel. Thus our ecumenical efforts are not choices we arbitrarily make, but are responsibilities we must necessarily assume. The pursuit of seamlessness and diversity are two permanent elements which should accompany our desire for the fulfilment of the prayer of Jesus: that all may be one so that the world may believe (John 9:17-21).

The scriptural theme for this year's Week of Prayer for Christian Unity is taken from the encounter of Jesus with the Samaritan Woman at the well (John 4:4). Jesus, tired from His journey, asks her for a drink. Likewise, in a spirit of restlessness, we thirst for the solutions of a divided Christian world. As we reflect on this passage, we might pause to ask Jesus that we be given to drink deeply from the wellsprings of seamlessness and diversity so as to further this holy cause of Christian unity.

As pilgrims, we must be optimistic and hope-filled disciples so that what Jesus Himself longed and prayed for will come to pass. Each of us is called to this form of spiritual ecumenism because just as prayer is the soul of the Church, so too is prayer the soul of the ecumenical movement. Finally, because mutual conversion is at the centre of our common quest for Christian unity, it is well to keep in mind that the more we grow in holiness, the closer we become in unity with one another.

(Fr. MacPherson, SA, is the Director for Ecumenical and Interfaith Affairs for the Archdiocese of Toronto.)