

That all may be ONE

There is hope on the horizon. A new breeze is blowing through the Church. It is the breath of the Holy Spirit stirring within believers a new desire for unity. The wounds inflicted through the tragic splits in Christianity are slowly being healed. Suspicion is being replaced by hospitality; bigotry with dialogue.

The winds of change were especially felt at the Second Vatican Council—that historic gathering in the 1960s which set the whole Church on a path of spiritual and structural renewal. One of the fruits of the Council was the Catholic Church's public commitment to ecumenism. Its vision for a unified Christian church was articulated in one of the documents of Vatican II.

Nearly 30 years later, taking stock of all that has happened since the Council, Pope John Paul II has given this great theme of Christian unity new vigor in a papal encyclical (letter) released in May 1995.

***Ut unum sint!* 'That all may be one!' is both the title and the passionate plea which opens that letter.**

At school one day...

A fight broke out while I was on playground duty. Two very big boys, identical twins, were at each other's throats. When I finally dragged them apart, I said: 'OK. Now tell me what's going on here.'

'He called my mother a.....'

I said, 'Wait a minute, this doesn't make sense. You guys have the same mother!'

'Yeah,' said the boy. 'And that's why I want to kill him!' (Rod)

This anecdote, both humorous and sad, highlights the absurdity of the division between Christians. While professing to worship the same God, the children of God have a history of bickering, bloodshed and stony silences. Rather than living as one identifiable body, we are splintered into many different churches and communities.

The good news, however, is that today Christians are more committed than ever to restoring their lost unity. This is what we refer to as 'ecumenism' – the movement in the churches towards the recovery of the unity of all Christians.

Unity: God's desire

While there are many complex questions surrounding the quest for unity, one thing is certain: God wants it! To live as one people, embraced by the mystery of God's love: this is God's gift and desire for the church and for all humanity. It was Jesus' great prayer in those last hours before his death:

'May they all be one, just as, Father, you are in me and I am in you... so that the world may believe it was you who sent me' (Jn 17:21).

This unity which Christians seek is more than a 'feel good' camaraderie or vague family spirit. It is a profound intimacy between believers that comes from our sharing in the love between Father, Son and Holy Spirit. It is a bond based on our common faith in the risen Christ.

Unity is not an optional extra to Christian belief. It stands at the very heart of Christianity. Far from being an appendix tacked on to traditional church activity, ecumenism is 'an organic part of her life and work,' writes John Paul II.

A path of pain, a path of joy

Ecumenism can be a painful path. Facing the reality of a broken relationship always is – just ask a married couple who has walked this road. Years of hurts and misunderstandings accumulate into what seems an uncrossable abyss of anger or indifference.

But ecumenism is also a path of joy. It is a journey of many loving steps involving prayer, dialogue, and common action. It is a patient process of coming to a deeper appreciation of one another and replacing painful memories with positive ones. In *Ut Unum Sint* the pope discusses numerous examples of reconciliation between the churches in recent years – from ecumenical prayer groups in parishes to meetings between popes and eastern patriarchs at an international level. As we realize how far we have come, we rejoice in the power of the risen Christ to heal and forgive.

Never before has the move towards unity been so strong and so extensive. How blessed we are to see this dream of communion becoming a reality!

“Father, may they all be one...”

Unity! It's happening

Just a joke?

'I went to a party dressed in an outrageous T-shirt with a slogan supporting a politically motivated group known for its violent tactics. I thought it was a big joke until a bloke came up to me and said: 'I like your T-shirt'. I started to say, 'Yeah, isn't it hilarious' when I realized he was deadly serious. I mean, this guy actually agreed with its sentiments! Dangerous prejudices still exist...and here was I, promoting them.' (JF)

Unity calls for sacrifice

Because the unity that Christians seek has profound human and spiritual depths, it can only be achieved at great personal cost. Ut Unum Sint emphasizes this point in terms of Christian martyrdom (nos.1, 84). Unity involves far more than intellectual assent to certain ideas. It calls for a 'dying' to oneself. It demands that we let go our suspicions and our defensiveness towards Christians of other churches; that we get beyond

our apathy and ignorance (and our contentment to stay that way). The witness of the martyrs spurs us on to 'give all' for the sake of this dream. They are powerful proof that, through embracing the cross of Christ, God's love will win through.

Unity starts with us

The path to unity involves the commitment of all members of the church. It is not just a specialist task for academics. John Paul II reminds us that the breakthroughs of ecumenical dialogue cannot stop at the level of committee statements. They must filter through the whole church and be received into the daily lives of ordinary Christians. (n.80)

Prayer: the 'soul' of dialogue

In recent times it is indeed encouraging to see Christians of different churches talking and praying together. Prayer is the 'soul' of ecumenical renewal, says Ut Unum Sint (nos.28, 70), the basis for all our dialogue. Prayer opens us to the love

Reflection: Ut Unum Sint is a call to personal conversion. Something has to *change* within our hearts; something that leads us to think and act differently toward other Christians. We might begin by asking: Do I feel sad about our loss of unity or do I casually accept it ('Oh well, that's just the way things are')? Unless we sincerely grieve our loss and yearn for unity, we will never really be motivated enough to make it

of God. It is what makes inter-church discussions more than an exchange of ideas, but an exchange of self.

We all know how, in our human frailty, our intellect can become clouded when our emotional temperature boils with indignation or ices over with cool superiority. Fruitful ecumenical discussions are always undertaken in a spirit of prayer and conversion (in n.33 the pope calls it a 'dialogue of consciences'), ready to acknowledge our own sins and mistakes and to forgive the failures of others.

Active together in the world

Working together for justice is another key step towards Christian unity. More and more, the churches are combining their voices and resources to speak out in defense of human rights. Ut Unum Sint (n.43) applauds these initiatives. When Christians take a united stand for justice and peace they show the tangible impact of Christ's presence in the world.

Positive signs on the Path to Unity

- **Today Christians see each other, not as enemies or strangers, but as brothers and sisters. There is a greater awareness that we all belong to Christ.**
- **Today Christians work together for justice and peace.**
- **The Week of Prayer for Christian Unity has become a widespread practice.**
- **Whereas once debates about Scripture influenced divisions, today Christians enjoy common translations of the Bible.**
- **There are signs of convergence in our approach to liturgy and sacraments.**
- **There is greater willingness to appreciate the holiness and signs of renewal in one another's churches.**
- **Numerous historic meetings have taken place between recent popes and the leaders of other Christian churches in both the East and West. Given our history of division, some of these have been truly momentous occasions.**

Unity respects truth

Put Christ first

Ecumenism must be firmly based on conversion to Christ. Ut Unum Sint calls the Catholic faithful to enter into a 'dialogue of conversion.' Each individual must have the courage to place before God his/her failures which impede church unity. By acknowledging our sins, a space opens up within us—a sacred space where Christ can act. This takes great courage and self-surrender. In the martyrs and saints, Christians have a marvelous source of inspiration and encouragement. (nos.35, 82-85)

Unity reveres the truth

The issues which have divided Christians are numerous and complex. Some have been resolved relatively easily through growing attitudes of acceptance. Other issues relating to doctrinal and ethical questions present a more formidable stumbling block because they relate to our understanding of the truth.

Ut Unum Sint reminds us that a true vision of unity never compromises the truth. Unity built on half-truths for the sake of 'keeping the peace' cannot lead to complete union. Fruitful ecumenical dialogue reveres the truth, while recognizing that there are different ways of expressing it.

A challenge for Catholics

Today Catholics 'are conscious of being deeply challenged by the Lord of the church' (n.10). On the one hand the Catholic Church must stand for what she believes to be right—even when that stance is viewed unfavorably by other Christians. On the other hand she must be open to the questions and challenges of other churches, continually renewing herself in the light of ecumenical conversation.

A position reaffirmed

Ut Unum Sint reaffirms the Catholic position that during the 2,000 years of her history, the fundamental beliefs and practices that were cornerstones of the early church are still part of the Catholic Church to this very day. It is true that sin and failure are part of the daily lives of Catholics. Even so, despite times of great turmoil the Catholic Church has never formally discarded the essential building blocks which are foundational for her continuing development. Catholics believe the Spirit has protected their Church in her essential identity even through the severest of crises. (n.11)

Christianity beyond Catholicism

The Catholic Church also recognizes that God's Spirit is alive and active beyond the visible boundaries of the Catholic community. It is a delight and inspiration for Catholics to see this! There is so much we can learn and be challenged by in the witness of other Christians. Ut Unum Sint (nos.47-48) strongly affirms the witness of other churches. As places of sanctification and truth they share a spiritual bond with the Catholic Church. In some real way they are joined with us in the Holy Spirit, forming 'a certain, though imperfect communion' (n.11).

Unity and the pope

One controversial feature of Catholic belief is our recognition of the pope (also referred to as 'the bishop of Rome') as a special minister of unity. Just as Peter and Paul were entrusted with a unique role of authority among the apostles, Catholics look to the ministry of the pope, together with the body of bishops, as a visible sign and guardian of the oneness of Christ's faithful. From generation to generation

the papal ministry stands as a powerful sign that the Catholic Church continues to walk in the footsteps of the first apostles. Catholics look forward to the day when all the churches and their bishops will be united with the church of Rome and her bishop (pope). This is an area requiring deeper reflection among the churches, the pope himself acknowledging that the papacy must remain 'open to a new situation' by which its ministry is exercised (nos.88-97).

The Catholic Church asks forgiveness

Ut Unum Sint acknowledges that the papacy is a difficulty for many Christians who recall instances in history of corruption in church leadership. John Paul II makes no excuses for these sinful chapters in the Church's life. He asks forgiveness for the sins of the past (n.88). He notes that, like the first 'Peter', every pope needs to pray for conversion so as to be faithful to his calling. 'May all join me in praying for this conversion!' he writes (n.4).

And there's more to talk about...

Ut Unum Sint identifies five areas in need of more study, prayer and reflection:

- **The relationship between Scripture and Tradition**
- **The Eucharist**
- **Ordination as a sacrament**
- **The Magisterium (the teaching role of the hierarchy)**
- **The Virgin Mary**

The path ahead

Unity: Don't settle for less

How much further must we go in this vision of unity? All the way! says the Pope (nos.77-79). While we celebrate our ecumenical progress, we can never be satisfied with only partial communion; Our calling is to be ONE body of Christ.

There can be a temptation to smooth over differences and seek a superficial unity. Like a married couple who keep the peace by tip-toeing around 'problem areas' rather than face into their differences, Christians too can be tempted to settle for an uneasy 'truce' rather than the profound oneness of mind and heart for which Jesus prayed.

The path ahead requires courage, patience and avoidance of two extremes: demanding too much of each other and expecting too little. Unnecessary burdens must not be placed on people, but nor should we become soft and wishy-washy, substituting 'friendliness' for full communion and compromising our deepest values.

THINK ABOUT IT

'There can be no ecumenism worthy of the name without a change of heart.' (n.15)

What subtle prejudices do I harbor towards other Christians (even as a 'joke')?

Are there Christians of other churches within my own family/friendship circles? What efforts do I make to understand and appreciate their faith?

Do I understand enough about my own Catholic faith to be able to share it with other Christians?

What ecumenical initiatives are in my area? How can I participate?

How often do I pray for Christian unity?

Unity: a sign to the world

Have you ever been in the presence of a husband and wife deeply in love, who find their joy in each other and naturally share that joy with others? There is something attractive and intriguing about such a couple. Likewise, when Christians are deeply in love, one in mind and heart, they exude an attractive quality that draws others to them. This is what 'evangelization' is about—the way Christians share the Good News of Christ's love. Being a sign to others is the whole point of Christian unity, says Ut Unum Sint (n.98-99). The deeper the union between Christians, the more clearly people can recognize the body of Christ and make a choice for the gospel.

Conversely, when we are divided, the force of our witness is weakened. 'When non-believers meet Christians who do not agree among themselves, even though they all appeal to the same Christ, will they be in a position to receive the true message?' asks John Paul II (n.98). Unity is the most basic way we share our faith.

Unity: Yes! It's possible

Ut Unum Sint concludes (n.100-103) with a section entitled 'Exhortation' (Vaticanese for 'Go for it!'). The Second Vatican Council made a great start in sending Catholics forth on the ecumenical journey. As the church turns her gaze to the new millennium, she asks for the grace to strengthen her unity. How is she to receive this grace?

1. Through prayer
2. Through giving thanks
3. Through hope in the Spirit

Is full union really possible? Remember the angel's reply to Mary of Nazareth? YES! With God, nothing is impossible.

Living Lesson

'My grandparents have been married for 50 years and their lives are so intertwined it is impossible to imagine one without the other. They complete each other's sentences, and have an uncanny ability to read each other's thoughts and anticipate each other's moods and actions. In a word, they are one. Two unique individuals, completely different personalities, but one life. As children we loved to spend time at their place. And their home was always full. It had an aura of love and strength that attracted people. In my adult life, I have completed a theology degree and read lots of books. But nothing gives me more insight into the 'oneness' of God than my grandparents.' (Charlene)

