

Ecumenical



Interfaith/Committee

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TIME FOR UNITY - TIME FOR REPENTENCE

One of the most difficult things about writing this set of articles is that I write them one month (yes, usually right before the deadline), and they are not published until two months later. I could blame it on my personality type (I am an Intuitive-Perceiver: grabbing ideas out of the air, and then not bringing them to closure), or it could be the flaw of procrastination, but, I suspect, it is a combination of the two. As I write this, we are in Prayer for Christian Unity Week, but you will not read it until we're well into Lent.

Jesus' "High Priestly" prayer, in the Gospel of John, asks the Father that "they may be one, as you and I are one." That's a pretty powerful image. We express that mystery of unity and distinction in the doctrine of the Trinity: God is, at the same time, both One and Three. Jesus also tells the apostles that the way the world will know they are his disciples is because of their love for one another. In the doctrine of the Trinity, the Holy Spirit is the Bond of Love that both unites and distinguishes the Father and Son: love unites, but also lets the other be other.

What does this have to do with Christian ecumenism? I will allow other Christians to do their own soul-searching, but we Catholics have a terrible tendency to think that what unites us is uniformity: we think we should all be the same. G.K. Chesterton, himself a Catholic, described the Catholic Church as "Here comes everybody." We have Latin and Maronite Rites, Franciscan and Carmelite spiritualities, Thomistic and Augustinian theologies. Yet, somehow, within these very real differences, there is a marvelous

unity. The unity is not based on agreement on every detail of thought and practice, but on love.

Jesus prayed that his disciples be one, and he prayed not just for the apostles, but for those who would believe because of them. He prayed for us. Yet, when we look at the Christian Church, it is obvious that we have not obeyed very well. Christianity looks hopelessly divided: Catholics, Anglicans, Orthodox, and somewhere around 90,000 (that's hyperbole, not literal) types of Protestants. Sometimes, the divisions are over doctrines that are considered essential, but, too often, those divisions have been generated, or perpetuated, by the lack of love, by not listening to the Spirit of unity and diversity.

What if the response to Martin Luther had been different? What if the pope at the time had been a true pastor rather than worldly ruler and military leader, and had not allowed abuses in the Church to reach the point where Luther published his *95 Theses*? What if, instead of seeing the selling of indulgences as a way to fill the papal coffers, he had actually enforced Church teaching against the selling of indulgences? What if he had listened in love (not necessarily agreement) to Luther's concerns? Would the fires of division have gotten out of control? Would Luther be the founder of a new religious order, with its own legitimate theological and spiritual bent?

This is not just an historical problem for Church authorities: it affects individuals and families today. I know Catholics who have disowned relatives who have become Protestant, but who think themselves abused when shunned for being (or becoming) Catholic.

Ecumenism is not a Cole Porter "Anything Goes." It is not a dose of "Doctor Feel Good." It is an openness to members of our divided household, of the broken Body of Christ, in love and hope. No one knows what the united Church of the future will look like: ultimately, it is the Spirit who will work out the details of unity and diversity in the Church. Our part is to listen to the Spirit of Love.

So, perhaps the Spirit can use my personality flaw; maybe Lent is a great time to begin to repent for the lack of unity and love in the Christian Church, a time to begin to allow the Healing Spirit to mend the broken Body of Christ. And maybe, just maybe, during Prayer for Christian Unity week next year, we might be a little bit closer to realizing Jesus' prayer that we "all may be One." Don't be like me: don't put it off.