

On Reaching Christian Unity (Part 2)
Homily From Bishop Brian Farrell

DUBLIN, Ireland, JAN. 23, 2007 (Zenit.org).- Here is Part 2 a homily delivered Thursday in Dublin by Bishop Brian Farrell, secretary of the Pontifical Council for Promoting Christian Unity. It came at the opening of the Week of Prayer for Christian Unity.

Part 1 appeared Tuesday.

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What hope for ecumenism?

Clearly, the search for Christian unity will be long and difficult. So where do we stand? Believe me, we are not in an ecumenical winter, as some say. This past year alone has seen one important ecumenical event after another; the theological dialogues have gone on, with many good results; visits and meetings between the heads of Churches have been continuous; more and more people and local communities are taking part in what is now referred to as "spiritual ecumenism." Let me speak only of some of the things that I have personally experienced, and limited to this past year.

The general assembly of the [World Council of Churches] in Porto Alegre, Brazil, in February 2006, brought together more than three hundred different churches from practically all Christian traditions; the International Catholic-Orthodox Theological dialogue in Belgrade in September; the theological dialogue with the Ancient Oriental-Orthodox Churches (Armenian Apostolic Church, the Coptic Church, the Syrian Orthodox Church, the Malankara Church, the Ethiopian and Eritrean Churches).

There are continuous contacts, meetings and dialogues with practically all the Christian World Communions. The [Pontifical Council for Promoting Christian Unity] is directly involved in twelve official dialogues with Churches and ecclesial communities at the international level, and takes part in many other meetings and activities of ecumenical interest.

Official international delegations to visit Benedict XVI: from the World Alliance of Reformed Churches; from the Lutheran Church of Finland, of Norway, of Sweden; from the World Methodist Council; the Lutheran World Federation; the visit of the archbishop of Canterbury; the archbishop of Athens and All Greece. As every year there was an exchange of delegations between the Pope and the Ecumenical Patriarch, at the end of June for the feast of Sts. Peter and Paul, the patron saints of Rome, and at the end of November for the feast of St. Andrew, the patron saint of Constantinople. Except that this year the Catholic delegation to Constantinople was led by Pope Benedict himself.

People want to see results from all this activity. But the communion we seek is neither a question of Church diplomacy nor of strategic agreements made in ecclesiastical back-rooms. In its original sense it has to do with "participation," having a part in, sharing in God's gift of redemption and grace. We are brought into communion -- with God and with one another -- when we all share in the same grace: one Lord, one baptism, one Spirit, one Father of all.

And the visible sign of this communion will be as St. Paul describes it in 1 Corinthians 10:16-17: "The cup of blessing that we bless, is it not a participation in the blood of Christ? The bread that we break, is it not a participation in the body of Christ? Because the loaf of bread is one, we, though many, are one body, for we all partake of the one loaf."

Our ecumenical journey is not towards a mere appearance of unity -- towards some sort of ecclesiastical good neighborliness. The communion we seek has its source, its model and its fulfillment in the very life of the Trinity. Superficial gestures will not bring about the unity for which the Lord prayed.

Very often it is the significant though almost imperceptible gesture that marks the progress being made. Let me give a few examples.

First, that the Patriarch and the Pope exchanged the sign of peace during the Divine Liturgy itself. Up to now, at the Phanar, this gesture had always taken place after the celebration itself, given that for our Orthodox brothers the sign of peace within the liturgy expresses a very weighty commitment, introduced by the deacon with this exhortation: "Let us love one another that with one mind we may together make our profession of faith." And then follows the Creed. This may seem like a small thing; but it has much spiritual meaning.

Another important factor: in the common declaration signed by the Pope and the Patriarch, they recall "the solemn ecclesial act banishing from memory the ancient anathemas which for centuries have had a negative effect on relations between our Churches."

They then go on to say: "We have not yet drawn from this act all the positive consequences which can flow from it in our progress towards full unity." They are clearly saying: let us move in very real and practical ways to eliminate the remaining barriers keeping us apart.

And it is significant that Pope Benedict chose the solemn liturgy at the Patriarchate to meet head-on one of the major challenges of the ecumenical journey. In his words: "The issue of the universal service of Peter and his successors has unfortunately given rise to our differences of opinion, which we hope to overcome, thanks also to the theological dialogue which has been recently resumed."

And then with emphasis he renewed a commitment undertaken by Pope John Paul II: "Pope John Paul extended an invitation to enter into a fraternal dialogue aimed at identifying ways in which the Petrine ministry might be exercised today, while respecting its nature and essence, so as to 'accomplish a service of love recognized by all concerned' ['Ut Unum Sint,' 95]. It is my desire today to recall and renew this invitation."

The journey towards full communion may be slow and mostly imperceptible; but the Holy Spirit is at work, and someday, without us knowing how, he will bring to completion the work that he has begun.

So, what should we do?

Because the Church is not just her ministers and leaders but the whole body of the faithful, more and more people need to be involved in what is being called "spiritual ecumenism." Christians, no matter what tradition they belong to, can say with joy and gratitude that "what unites us is much greater than what divides us."

They believe in God the Father Almighty, in Jesus Christ, Son of God and Savior, and in the Holy Spirit, the advocate, the giver of life and holiness. They recognize that through the sacrament of baptism they are spiritually reborn and united with Christ and with one another. Together they honor Sacred Scripture as the word of God and as an abiding norm of belief and action. They share in prayer and in many other common sources of the spiritual life.

The Holy Spirit is operative among all the baptized with his sanctifying power. He calls all to true holiness, and it is he who in every generation has prepared Christians of all traditions to face martyrdom for Christ.

Spiritual ecumenism appreciates and values all these gifts in the Churches of East and West. So we need opportunities for a spiritual exchange of gifts.

Christians from different traditions need to meet each other, and in prayer, through a healing of memories, inspire each other to ever greater fidelity to Christ and to the Gospel.

That, in great part, is the value of the Week of Prayer for Christian Unity. Having a special week does not exhaust our commitment, but it reminds us that to love Christ's Church is to yearn for her holiness and her unity.

There are wrinkles, even unpleasant scars, on the face of the Church: and a strong ecumenical commitment is an essential factor in restoring her beauty.

Only when Christ's prayer at the Last Supper is fulfilled, only when we are all one as he ardently wished, only then will the Church clearly appear as the sign and sacrament of the world's salvation. Only then will God's purpose be fulfilled: "that the world may believe."

ZE07012426