

On Reaching Christian Unity (Part 1)
Homily From Bishop Brian Farrell

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

(Part 2 of the homily will appear on Wednesday)

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Every time the baptized come together to pray, it is the Spirit who guides them and teaches them how to pray. It is the same Spirit who builds the Church's unity. Naturally, people have been praying for the unity of Christ's followers since the beginning.

Christians who take to heart the 17th chapter of John's Gospel know that things are not as they should be and that the scandal of division weakens the proclamation of the Gospel; they know that the ecumenical movement is not a luxury in the life of the Church. We cannot separate our following of Christ from our passion for the unity of the Body of Christ that is the Church.

This year, the Week of Prayer for Christian Unity is 99 years old.

Ninety-nine years ago, Father Paul Watson, an Anglican priest and co-founder of the Society of the Atonement, introduced a Prayer Octave for Christian Unity that was celebrated for the first time Jan. 18-25, 1908.

Unity for Father Watson meant a "return" to the Roman Catholic Church, hence the symbolic dates of the feast of the Chair of Peter, which at that time was celebrated Jan. 18, and the feast of the Conversion of St. Paul on Jan. 25. This is usually regarded as the beginning of the week as we know it today.

In 1936, a pioneer of ecumenism in French Catholicism, the Abbé Paul Couturier, brought in a new interpretation of the Unity Octave, when he saw that the idea of "return" made it difficult for many Christians to join with Catholics in prayer. He began what he called the "Universal Week of Prayer for Christian Unity," keeping the same dates of Jan. 18-25, but urging people to pray for the unity of the Church "as Christ wills it." That is what we are here for this evening: to pray together for the unity, the full communion, of all the baptized, in the way and at the time that the Lord, through the work of the Holy Spirit, will arrange.

The scriptural theme of this year's week of prayer is taken from the story in Mark's Gospel [7:31-37] of the healing of the man who was deaf and had a speech impediment. Jesus looks up to heaven, sighs and says, "Ephphata -- be opened," and the man can hear and speak. "He makes the deaf hear and the mute speak."

Jesus brings the person back to his normal condition, in which he can, without hindrance, seek his fulfillment in contact and communion with others. The cured man becomes a symbol of a healed and reconciled humanity, capable of cherishing and practicing all those values and qualities that make life a reflection of the inner life of God himself: communication, harmony, solidarity, love, justice and peace.

But who decides the theme for each year? The process starts at the local level in a different country each year. In this way, Christians around the world pray out of the real-life experience of people trying to meet the challenges of a particular situation. For last year's week of prayer, an ecumenical group gathered here in Ireland with the help of Father Brendan Leahy, and sponsored by the Irish episcopal conference, suggested the theme of Christ present wherever his followers gather to invoke him.

Why that theme? The decades of sectarian violence had sharpened many people's sense of the inadequacy of every merely political effort to bring about reconciliation. Christians belonging to different traditions had discovered the power of prayer to bring them together beyond every boundary: "Where two or three gather in my name, there I am in their midst" [Matthew 18:18-20].

This year the inspiration comes from South Africa, specifically from Umlazi, near Durban. Umlazi is a "township," one of those segregated areas in which the black population was forced to live during the apartheid era. Umlazi is a place of unemployment and poverty, with all that goes with that in terms of privation in health care, housing, education, social cohesion, and hope. It, and other townships like it, are places where the HIV/AIDS tragedy has reached pandemic levels, with more than 50% of the population infected.

But there is a tragedy within the tragedy. "Ubunqunu" in the local language means something like being uncovered, "nakedness," and it refers to all those things that people do not ever talk about. There is a code of silence surrounding certain aspects of life.

There is a code of silence surrounding AIDS. It is a stigmatized disease. When they can no longer hide the symptoms, people retire to their huts and are seldom seen again. They do not seek help. Their families no longer mention them. South Africa as a country is only slowly coming to admit publicly that there is a problem.

The Churches in South Africa are working together to overcome this code of silence that leads to death. They have developed ecumenical prayer services, with "breaking the code of silence" as the central theme. Through prayer, people, especially young people, are given the confidence and courage to "speak the unspeakable."

At the heart of the materials prepared for this year's prayer for Christian unity you will hear an urgent call to "break the silence." In every culture there are enormous unmet needs: The poor, the sick, the homeless, the refugee and the outcast, are our neighbors. Injustice, discrimination, violence, even slavery, take their toll on the streets of Dublin, as they do in every city of our sin-marked world.

The deaf and dumb man of St. Mark's Gospel stands for all of us, individually and collectively. As in the case of the man who could neither hear nor speak, if the Lord loosens our tongues, our ability to understand and to speak out, in truth and honesty, would surely be a blessing for our society.

But note that Jesus first heals the man's inability to hear: Ephphata - - be opened! Surely what Jesus wants is not just that the man be able to hear the sound of words, but that he be able to listen to those around him. It is not "hearing" but "listening" that creates bonds of communication and communion, and therefore makes possible that unity of purpose without which no problem can be faced and managed.

In the materials offered by the people of Umlazi there is a prayer to break the silence, and it says: "Open our ears that we might hear the voices muffled by the trials and suffering of the transient world." If we listen to this cry in our hearts and in our consciences we may become better people, more committed followers of the Jesus who alone has the words of eternal life, who can teach us what it means to be genuinely human in a very dehumanized world.

However, there is something else to be learned from the people of Umlazi. In their severe deprivation and in their anguish for the AIDS pandemic, they look to the Churches for light and support. And what do they see?

Let me read their own words: "In Umlazi, there is one courthouse, one hospital, one post office, one clinic, one set of shops, and one cemetery reflecting one overwhelming challenge facing the people. In this same township, the people, almost all of whom are Christian, adhere to scriptures which profess that there is one body, one Spirit, one hope, one Lord, one faith, one baptism, one God and Father of us all [cf. Ephesians 4:4-6].

"Yet there are many churches, which are not in full communion with each other, and which remain a sign of divided Christianity. In Umlazi, there is an impatience and frustration with inherited divisions generated many centuries ago in other lands."

The sin and the scandal of division tear at the very heart of God's people. Our divisions run deep, and all our Churches are wounded and in need of conversion, purification and healing. That is what we are here for this evening.

(Wednesday: What hope for ecumenism?)

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