

January 18, 2017: Confession of St Peter, Sacramento, CA, Week of Prayer for Christian Unity; Maxwell E. Johnson

This week of prayer for Christian unity, established originally as the Octave of Christian Unity in 1908 between the feasts of the two great Apostles Peter and Paul, with what was then called the Chair of St Peter (at Rome) on January 18¹ and the Conversion of St Paul on January 25, was originally a time for Roman Catholics to pray for the rest of us, affectionately called “heretics and schismatics,” to return home to Rome so that unity might be re-established. Of course the rest of us were guilty of similar attitudes. When I was growing up in small town MN, about 85 miles south of Lake Wobegon, the last Sunday in October, known still as Reformation Sunday, was the time when we Lutherans celebrated how glad we were that we weren’t Catholics! The wounds of the 16th century, as someone has said recently, were still bleeding. But since the mid-1960’s, in light of the Second Vatican Council, and thanks to the ecumenical sensitivities of the Graymoor Franciscans of the Atonement, as well as the World Council of Churches, this week has become what it has remained, an ecumenical week of common prayer for unity and reconciliation. And while a January 18 Feast St Peter no longer appears on the current Roman Calendar, there is no question but that Peter’s Confession, “You are the Christ, the Son of the Living God,” is our common confession of faith to be celebrated and professed together to the world.

In large part, our continued reconciliation in Christ toward unity, our ability to make this common confession, has come about because of a renewed sense of our common baptismal

¹In the pre-Vatican Roman Catholic calendar there were two Chair of Peter Feasts: January 18 celebrated the Chair of Peter at Rome and February 22, the Chair of Peter at Antioch. In 1960 Pope John XXIII retained only the second one of these under the title of the Chair of Peter.

identity in Christ. Several years ago in his encyclical, *Ut Unum Sint* (“That they all may be one”), St Pope John Paul II asked of all of us: “How is it possible to remain divided if we have been 'buried' through baptism in the Lord's death, in the very act by which God, through the death of his Son, has broken down the walls of division? Division 'openly contradicts the will of Christ, provides a stumbling block to the world and inflicts damage on the most holy cause of proclaiming the good news to every creature.” [*Ut Unum Sint*, 6] And, further: “This unity, which the Lord has bestowed on his church and in which he wishes to embrace all people, is not something added on, but stands at the very heart of Christ's mission. Nor is it some secondary attribute of the community of his disciples. Rather, it belongs to the very essence of this community.” [*Ut Unum Sint*, 9]

Our Common Baptism into Christ. The baptismal language of the New Testament couldn't be clearer about this unity that already exists among us. St. Paul tells us in Ephesians that “[t]here is one body and one Spirit, just as you were called to the one hope of your calling, one Lord, one faith, one baptism, one God and Father of all, who is above all and through all and in all” (Ephesians 4:4-6); and in today's second reading, that “whoever is joined to the Lord becomes one spirit with the Lord,”...a “member of Christ.” Through water and the Spirit in Baptism. Just as Simon is re-named Peter the Rock, or “Rocky,” in today's Gospel, so we too received a new and common family name, that of “Christian;” through Baptism all of us have been incorporated into the *one* Christ, the *one* Church, the *one* Body of Christ in the world. Because of this, Christian unity is, above all, not a demand, not a call, but it is already a **gift** to be received gratefully and further realized visibly. Although we are baptized within particular faith communities, we are baptized - all of us - in the name of the trinitarian God into Christ and so, into the *one* holy catholic and apostolic Church of Jesus Christ. Because of this, in a very **real**

way, we baptized **already** belong to the same Church! Like it or not, because of baptism we are all in this together. And it is this common baptismal reality that must increasingly come to form our consciences and direct our hearts in the pursuit of Christian Unity today. For, baptized into Christ we are divided only if Christ Himself is divided.

Now I am not so naive as to think that there are no significant differences between the Christian churches of today. But if the past almost 50 years or so of ecumenical dialogues have taught us anything, it should be that many of those traditional differences, properly understood, are not *necessarily* church-dividing any longer, but may be viewed rather as legitimately distinct and complementary emphases and traditions within the one Body of Christ; emphases and traditions by which each of our churches can be mutually enriched by the other in a situation of greater communion. Indeed, in the ecumenical stew,² not melting pot, which boils everything down to the lowest common denominator, but in a savory stew in which each of the great Christian traditions can enrich the others, the following gifts might surely be noted. There is the Roman Catholic Church's preservation of the catholic substance of the faith, the commitment to the historical continuity of the church, and, not least, the love for the centrality of the Eucharist and its profound sense of the communion of saints; there is from the churches of the Christian East that strong expression of faith in the Holy Spirit, that love for the divine liturgy, and that respect for ecclesiastical tradition and sacramental art; there is from the Anglican Communion that respect for diversity and individual conscience which challenges the whole church, as well as those treasures of language and music which magnify God's holy Name; there is from the Lutheran tradition that love for the Scriptures and that faith in God's all-sufficient grace, which as the great Jesuit theologian, Karl Rahner, reminded us, call all Christians to receive God's

² I owe the image of an ecumenical "stew" versus "melting pot" to my former student, the Rev. Mark Strobel, Fargo, ND.

salvation as purest gift;³ there is from the Reformed churches, that focus on God's absolute sovereignty and God's condescension in entering into covenant with us and with edifying the whole Church through the proclamation of the Word; and from Baptists, Pentecostals, and other Free Church traditions that warmth, enthusiasm, and zeal for the gospel and personal relationship with Christ, which can bring new life to the work and prayer of the church. Indeed, where would we be with Gospel Music? Such is the ecumenical stew that calls to be cooked among us.

Several years ago, the world was pleasantly shocked and surprised by the unexpected fall of the Berlin Wall and the resulting political and social changes brought about. Indeed, Pope John Paul II said that "in the end ecumenical breakthrough will come with the suddenness of the collapse of the Berlin wall." But even if they do not attract the same kind of media attention, -- **positive** developments in the Church seldom create headlines! -- there are significant walls of division that are crumbling today between the churches of the world as new bridges are being built. In 1998, to cite but one example, Roman Catholics and Lutherans around adopted a common statement prepared by the Lutheran World Federation and the Vatican, called a "Joint Declaration on the Doctrine of Justification." In part, this document says boldly: "Together we [Roman Catholics and Lutherans] confess: By grace alone, in faith in Christ's saving work and not because of any merit on our part, we are accepted by God and receive the Holy Spirit, who renews our hearts while equipping and calling us to good works...Through [Christ] alone are we justified, when we receive this salvation in faith." And, further: "[this] is more than just one part of Christian doctrine. It is to serve as a criterion which constantly orients all the teaching and practice of our churches to Christ, whom alone we ultimately trust as the one Mediator (1 Tim 2:5-6) through whom God in the Holy Spirit gives himself and pours out his saving gifts..."

³ Karl Rahner, *Foundations of Christian Faith* (New York: Seabury, 1978), pp. 359-ff.

What a statement; a declaration not to be taken lightly. What it might mean for Roman Catholics I cannot say. But what it seems to imply for my own Lutheran church is that the very reason why the Protestant Reformation occurred in the first place, the very issue which gave rise to the "protest" in the word "Protestant," the central reason why Roman Catholics and Lutherans have been separated for some 450 years is now to be transcended in a new common affirmation of faith. Surprising, shocking; indeed, unexpected by any of our Catholic and Lutheran ancestors, unexpected, I suspect, by many, both lay and ordained, even within in our churches today. Never before in our history has Christian unity been so close. Yet, today, in our lifetime (!), such is the reality to which the rediscovery of our common Baptism has led us, thanks be to God! Ecumenism is not dead, as we hear it said today. Rather, ecumenism has deepened and is bearing rich fruits!

As an example of this, retired ELCA pastor Charles Austin recently wrote of his experience at the ELCA's national convention in New Orleans this past summer: "This past August, when the ELCA, this country's largest Lutheran church, met in New Orleans, Catholic Bishop Denis Madden of Baltimore, head of the U.S. Catholic Bishop's ecumenical committee, embraced ELCA Presiding Bishop Elizabeth Eaton, as the churches endorsed a *Declaration on the Way*, marking our agreements and outlining the path that lies ahead. Given a chalice by the Lutherans, Bishop Madden raised it high and said, 'I wait for the day, not long in coming I am sure, when we can share this chalice of the precious blood together.' And the thousand Lutherans at the meeting cheered and wept. I said to nearby friends, 'I guess the Reformation is over.'"⁴

⁴ *Forum Letter* 45, 12 (December 2016), 4.

And so it is, that the **gift** of our unity already given by God remains for us also an urgent and ever-present task and call, a vocation of ongoing conversion of life and heart toward unity and reconciliation both in our prayer and in our work. And there is an urgency about this. Those who say that it is the 20th and 21st centuries that should be known as the age of the martyrs are correct. The martyrs of the Armenian Genocide, the 40 Coptic martyrs killed by ISIS, the persecution of Christians throughout the Middle East. As Pope Francis has said: “When terrorists or world powers persecute Christian minorities or Christians, when they do this, they don’t ask: ‘But are you Lutheran? Are you Orthodox? Are you Catholic? Are you a Reformed Christian? Are you a Pentecostal?’ No! ‘You are a Christian!’ They only recognize one of them: ‘the Christian.’ The enemy never makes a mistake and knows very well how to recognize where Jesus is. This is ecumenism of the blood.... As in the ancient Church, the blood of the martyrs became the seed of new Christians, so in our day the blood of many Christians has become the seed of unity.... The ecumenism of suffering and the ecumenism of martyrdom, the ecumenism of blood is a powerful call to journey along the road of reconciliation among the Churches, with decision and with trusting abandonment to the action of the Spirit.”⁵ And as Bishop Francis Y. Kalabat the Chaldean Catholic Bishop in Detroit, has recently said about those Christians being persecuted in Iraq, as part of a slow-motion genocide there and elsewhere in the Middle East today: “We are called the Church of Martyrs. “That’s our pain and our saving grace. Our faith isn’t a theory. It’s not a set of teachings. It’s a person and we’re called to be like him. When I look at this evil, I want to be Rambo. But that won’t do any good. We carry the cross for a

⁵ 2014-05-08 Vatican Radio

reason.”⁶ With St Peter we say today as one Christian family, “You are the Christ, the Son of the Living God.” We carry his cross for a reason. Dear friends in Christ: let us then work to remove all the barriers that separate the baptized from each other, especially at the altar. Living out our common baptismal plunge into Christ's death and resurrection, let us truly die in Christ to all that separates us so that His Spirit alone might give us new life together to the glory of God. Why? For the sake of the credibility of the Church's mission, our common confession of Christ in the world!

⁶S.G. Freedman, As Iraqi Christians in U.S. Watch ISIS Advance, They See ‘Slow-Motion Genocide’ *New York Times*, Sept 6, 2014.