



THIRD SUNDAY OF YEAR A: Octave of Prayer for Christian Unity

In our first reading today, the prophet Isaiah speaks a word of hope to the Israelites of the north, in the land of Zebulun and Naphtali, in what came to be called Galilee. These northern Israelites were schismatics—that is, they were religiously divided from the people of Judah in the south. This division happened after the death of King Solomon, who in his youth had been a paragon of wisdom but who, in his later years, became tyrannical and foolish and abusive of the power that God had given him. Solomon's son was unwilling to change direction; as a result, the ten northern tribes split off and installed kings and priests and temples of their own devising. Meanwhile, in the southern kingdom of Judah, the Lord's one true Temple stood in Jerusalem and the descendants of David still ruled. At the time that Isaiah wrote, the schism between the northern and southern kingdoms was already two centuries old. Judah and Israel were estranged, and there was bad blood between them; and yet, the prophets knew that this division was not God's will. The northern kingdom was now facing its final crisis in the form of an Assyrian conquest. In this hour of darkness for the northern schismatics, Isaiah bids them hope in a great King descended from David, who will unite Judah and Israel once more:

The people who walked in darkness have seen a great light;
those who dwelt in a land of deep darkness, on them has light shined...
For to us a child is born, to us a son is given;
and the government will be upon his shoulder,
and his name will be called Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting
Father, Prince of Peace (Is 9.2, 6).

Today's gospel quotes these very words from Isaiah, for Christ is the one who "is our peace, who has made us both one... and might reconcile us both to God in one body through the Cross" (Eph. 2.14, 16). Just as Isaiah hoped and prayed for the unity of all Israel around the Messiah, so in these days between the 18th and the 25th of January, we pray in a special way for the visible unity of Christians through the ministry of the Pope, the successor of St. Peter and the Vicar of Christ.

Now I wish to begin my reflections on unity by telling you a personal story that for me exemplifies vividly the divided state of Christendom. So I want to tell you about the time when I nearly died of a drug overdose.

Yes, you heard me correctly. At the time of my overdose, I was only two years old; and the drug that I took was St. Joseph's Children's Aspirin. The bottle was left on top of a high chest of drawers; even at the age of two, I had a sweet tooth, and the children's aspirin was sweet. So somehow I climbed up and took the forbidden fruit and greedily ate most of what was in the bottle. My aunt found me writhing in pain, saw the near-empty bottle, and rushed me to the emergency room at the hospital. I had my stomach pumped and was put in the oxygen tent. The doctor thought I had even chances of death or survival.



SAINT LOUIS ABBEY



Now there was an Episcopal priest visiting the hospital named Father Smith who was a great support to my Catholic mother during that crisis when my life hung in the balance. My mother still remembers gratefully Father Smith's kindness and support during that crisis. She also vividly remembers that Father Smith said he had always wanted to be a Catholic priest but that he was married and had a family already. Despite his Catholic convictions, the Catholic priesthood was out of reach; and so he remained and ministered as an Episcopalian. And yet, Father Smith was very respectful of the celibate priesthood: he said that Father McNiff, the local Catholic priest, was so blessed in that his renunciation of natural fatherhood made it possible for him to be a father to all those entrusted to him.

Think about the situation:

- I am near death;
- my parents are married outside the Church;
- my father is not even baptized—sectarian strife among Christians led him to refuse the sacrament;
- the Catholic priest is too overwhelmed with his huge parish to come to the hospital;
- the priest who baptized me had abandoned the priesthood;
- so it falls to the Episcopal rector to minister to my family.
- The Episcopal clergyman is Catholic and heart and wishes he had been a Catholic priest.

From every human and religious standpoint, this is an intolerable mess, from start to finish!

And yet, the grace of God was operative even in that hour of darkness: I survived my overdose, the crisis passed, the irregular marital situation was resolved. I don't know what ever happened to Father Smith; but even if his priesthood was not valid in Catholic terms, yet his ministry was fruitful in that hour of crisis. For me, this situation is a kind of microcosm—a miniature representation—of the state of divided Christendom. For though we are bound to the sacraments, God is not: the Latin theological saying is *Deus non sacramentis alligatur sed nos*. That means that God can give his grace where and when he wills, and even to those who are in schism or error through no personal fault.

I hope I have made clear the depth of my gratitude to Protestant Christians, especially to Episcopalians; but there are other reasons for my gratitude, as well. It was an Episcopal school very much like Priory that provided me with a scholarship without which I could never have attended. It was the Episcopalians who taught me Latin when after Vatican II the Catholics were suicidally trying to erase the very memory of Latin and of all Catholic tradition. It was the Anglican Benedictine, Dom Gregory Dix, who taught me about the historical development of the liturgy and the close connection between right doctrine



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(orthodoxy) and right worship (liturgical orthopraxis). At key moments in my life, Anglican writers like C.S. Lewis and T. S. Eliot taught me Catholic truth, when the Catholic Church's true voice was not easily heard. To other Protestant Christians, I am also grateful: my encounter with zealous evangelicals and fundamentalists stimulated me into learning to defend the faith and into a desire to share it with others.

And so, strangely enough, I owe much of my Catholicity—even perhaps indirectly my monastic vocation—to non-Catholics. How surprising are the workings of grace. I can only think of St. Paul's words to the Romans: "O the depth of the riches and wisdom and knowledge of God! How unsearchable are his judgments and how inscrutable his ways!" (Rom. 11.33).

A few years ago, I discovered that the founding prior of our community, Fr. Columba Cary-Elwes, wrote an entire book about Christian reunion: one of his memorable statements is that among his ancestors there were both Catholic martyrs and Anglican bishops. In some sense, they were all members of one family, despite everything. In saying this, Fr. Columba was aware of the human and historical complexity of the problem of Christian unity. Fr. Columba had this to say about the errors of Protestants:

We may be pretty sure that most of those [Protestants] with whom we are personally acquainted are in good faith in their heresies; they were brought up so. The errors which they believe as true are no less erroneous for all that (*The Sheepfold and the Shepherd*, p. 28). At the same time, it would be wrong to leave the non-Catholic Christian with the idea that we are satisfied with the positive truth he still retains. We are *not* satisfied. We rejoice at finding the truth that is there, but we are equally bold in pointing out to what extent it falls short of the whole truth (p. 61). The Catholic, because he believes he has the truth in matters of religion, is bound by this principle to attempt to teach it to all men, Jew, Gentile, heretic, schismatic (p. 70). Christians are divided, the Church cannot be (p. 95)... Therefore, for a Catholic, reunion can only mean the return of individual souls to the bosom of the Church. They may do it in groups... or individually, but Reunion cannot be conceived by Catholics as the recreation of a unity which was lost. To admit such a suggestion would be to admit that Christ's promise of unity was not fulfilled. He said, "There will be one fold and one shepherd" (Jn 10.16) (pp. 98-99).

To put it plainly: the path to unity is the integral acceptance of the Catholic faith and unity of faith with the Pope as successor of St. Peter and Vicar of Christ. The scattered tribes of the New Israel need to be gathered in the true Temple by the true priesthood to offer as one holy people the one Sacrifice of Christ. So, yes, we do pray for the Catholic conversion of our Protestant friends and neighbors, for the conversion of the Jews, for the conversion of all people of all religions—and no less fervently for our own conversion to a deeper Catholicity.



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As our Lord said in his High Priestly Prayer, “This is eternal life, that they know thee the only true God, and Jesus Christ whom thou hast sent” (Jn 17.3).