

Praying for Christian Unity

“What happened to all the excitement concerning the ‘ecumenical movement’?”

Good question which I am sometimes asked and especially in January. For at least fifty years the week between January 18 (The Feast of the Confession of St. Peter) and January 25 (The Feast of the Conversion of St. Paul) has been kept as the “Week of Prayer for Christian Unity”.

Forty years ago, in the heyday of the American Council of Churches, the new Revised Standard translation of the Bible marked an ecumenical breakthrough of cooperation. Then as many as ten “Main Line” Protestant denominations began exploring the possibility of a new, giant merger, the “The Church of Christ Uniting”. Nothing ever came of this effort as the partner denominations could not find enough common ground in structure and worship traditions. No one really wanted to give up their cherished ways of doing things. And what would we do with the duplication of church buildings, many of which would be just down the street in a new, giant merger of Protestant churches?

Back in the heady days following the Second Vatican Council of the Catholic Church, we thought we had also entered into a new era. Suddenly, Rome was encouraging Catholics to share some worship with other Christians. Multi-lateral “dialogues” were established between the Catholic Church and many Protestant and Orthodox denominations. Over the course of forty years, several documents were produced and a number of highly publicized meetings occurred between the Pope and the leaders of the various denominations.

The words of Jesus in the Garden, “Father, I pray that they may all be one” seemed to take on new meaning. The scandal of our sad divisions seemed to be almost behind us.

Yet as we enter 2012, all of this seems in the past. The energy for ecumenism seems to have dissipated. The Protestant churches seem to be refocused either on more members and mega churches (the Evangelical churches) or on survival in the face of a cultural decline in church membership (the Main Line denominations). Meanwhile, the Catholic Church continues to affirm dialogue with other Christians while steadfastly maintaining its boundaries (limiting its communion to only Roman Catholics and requiring couples to raise their children in the Catholic Church).

Well, at the risk of sounding too pessimistic, let me offer another perspective: we have indeed come a very long way in the past forty years or so. Among Protestants, there is now a much more open welcome for others to share in our Communion. Between my own Episcopal Church and the Evangelical Lutheran Church we have a model ‘concordant’ which in effect celebrates our different heritage, worship, and organization, while recognizing the other denomination, its clergy and members. In effect, we have become interchangeable. As an Episcopal Priest, I can now serve in a Lutheran Church, and Lutheran Pastors can be called to serve Episcopal congregations. Our members can transfer membership between denominations. In many places, we are working alongside each other. Yet we maintain our own buildings, liturgies, hymnals, and finances!

In the First Epistle of John, it is written, “It does not yet appear what we shall be...”. But we are surely living into a new age of cooperation, mutual affirmation, and joint ministry. Frankly, for me, it can’t come fast enough. And I still think our divisions are an absolute scandal to Christ. No wonder many outside Christianity look at us and shake their head.

So, another year is upon us and another Week of Prayer for Christian Unity. I am a little tired of praying. I think it is time to act. We don’t have to have every belief, custom, liturgy, or structure in common. Unity does not demand uniformity.

Or to make it simple, “What would Jesus do?” Isn’t that answer quite apparent? Jesus often sat at table with friends, outcasts of society, and people whose interpretation of Scripture and traditions were very much at odds with his preaching. But he welcomed them all, at the same table. Can we justify acting any differently? My prayer is that this will not be the Week of Prayer... but the Week of Christian Unity.

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