

## 18. Christian Unity

There is only one Christ and he founded only one Church. He called all his followers into one united People of God. He prayed that they would all be united. He told them that this very unity would be a sign to the whole world that they were in fact his true followers.

Yet today there are hundreds of independent Christian groups in the world, all differing in varying degrees from one another. This is a very sad state of affairs. The ordinary man is puzzled by it. It is undoubtedly one of the reasons why so many people even in Christian countries do not take Christianity seriously at all. There are more than six million people in Australia who are not seriously committed to any religion. It is the will of Christ that his message of salvation be preached to all of them.

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### ***Why the Divisions Exist***

God has not explained himself to all people in the same way. He has not given to all the same opportunity of hearing Christ's teaching. He will never condemn anyone because he has not had an opportunity of learning the truth. Nobody is rejected by God unless he knowingly rejects God first.

Once God came to live amongst us as a man, he limited himself in certain ways. Jesus Christ, who was God made man, lived in a small country at a particular time in history. Only some thousands of people knew him or met him during his life. After he had gone back to his Father, people near the time and place where he had lived heard his message first of all.

As the years and centuries rolled by, it was those near where the Church was strong and where Christians were numerous who again had the best chance of hearing the message. This is true today. Perhaps this is largely due to man's defects. But whatever the cause, all people have not had the same chance of hearing the Gospel and this indeed a challenge to all of us Christians.

There are other reasons why people believe differently and are slow to accept Christ's teaching. Each person's back-ground and inclination colour his thoughts as he hears the teaching. In the Gospel, Jesus tells the story of the sower whose seed fell on different sorts of ground. According to the ground's fertility, the seed produced more, or less, fruit. There are so many things in our background which help to determine our reactions – family, culture, religious tradition, temperament, surroundings.

Again, human faults such as pleasure seeking, jealousy, suspicion, selfishness and laziness can obscure the light for many. With all this it is not surprising that there should be disagreement between groups and individuals over what Christ has said. We believe, however, that in spite of all these difficulties Christ has made sure that the essential truth of his message shall remain in this world, because he has promised to be with his Church to the end of the world. He will see to it that the truth of God shall remain with us.

### ***Non-Christian Religions***

There are many ties of common belief between Christian and non-Christian religions. Many of them recognize and worship God the Creator and see his presence in history and in human affairs. Hindus try to probe the mystery of God and express their beliefs in myths and a very deep philosophy. Buddhists see how inadequate this world is and seek for liberation from it. Muslims realize our total dependence on God and that he has made himself known to us. Muslims trace their religion from Abraham and honour Jesus as a prophet, born of a virgin and working miracles. But they do not recognize him as God.

Above all, we see how we are closely linked to the Jews and share with them the Old Testament of the Bible. We cannot forget that Jesus was born amongst them of a Jewish mother and that he gave his teaching to the Apostles who were also Jewish. We realize that they do not recognize Jesus as the Messiah and do not accept his teaching, although nowadays some of them accept him as a Rabbi.

We believe in the universal brotherhood and the dignity of man, for each was created by the same heavenly Father. We wish to be at peace with them all. This does not prevent us from being Christ's faithful witness.

### ***Divisions among Christians***

We do not close our eyes to the fact that there are deep divisions among Christians today. Many of the divisions owe their origin more to politics and prejudice than to theology. Even in the letters of St. Paul and St. John we see warnings against disunity within the Christian community. For the first three hundred years of Christianity there was persecution of the Church; this bound Christians together into a close community. But once the age of persecution was over, quarrels among them began to take place, especially in the East. Some of the differences centred on fundamental beliefs about Christ. Sections of the Church broke away, and some of the divisions remain to this day.

Today, as a result of these divisions, there are many people of good will who have found deep faith in Christ through these separated communities. The Catholic Church regards them as brothers and respects the validity of the baptism

by which they have become Christians. They do not belong fully to the Catholic Church, but they are rightly called our fellow Christians. Many of the qualities of true Christians exist among them. The Holy Spirit guides them and helps them in their individual and community prayers and gives them his graces. They play an important part in helping many people to know and love Christ, and to live according to his will.

These separated communities do not yet possess the complete unity which Christ longed to give to all his followers. But the Holy Spirit is at work today among Catholics and among the separated communities, urging Christians everywhere to pray and work for a complete unity. The results of this welcome movement towards Christian Unity are becoming daily more apparent.

### ***The Eastern churches***

As time went on, the Eastern part of the Church, centred on Constantinople, grew estranged from the Western part, centred on Rome. This was due to many causes, some of them political, some of them theological. In the year 1054 things reached such a pitch that the Pope and the Patriarch of Constantinople excommunicated each other.

At the close of the recent Vatican Council in December, 1965, Pope Paul VI and the Eastern Patriarch Athenagoras express their mutual regret for these excommunications and for the offensive words and unfounded reproaches that accompanied them on both sides. They expressed a wish to remove the memory of these unhappy events from the Church and to forget them. This was a big step forward towards the complete reunion of the Eastern Churches and ourselves.

Today there is very close co-operation between us. After the break with Rome over nine hundred years ago the Eastern Churches retained practically all the beliefs and devotions which were common to both East and West down the centuries. They have validly ordained priests and bishops, a true Mass and Sacraments, and a deep devotion to the Blessed Eucharist. The great beauty of their liturgical prayers has had considerable influence on the recent reforms of the Catholic liturgy. They are outstanding for their devotion to the Blessed Virgin Mary and the Saints. Their teaching on all the big moral issues of today corresponds very accurately with our own.

During the controversy in 1968 over Pope Paul's condemnation of the contraceptive pill the Eastern Patriarch Athenagoras said:

**"I am in agreement with the Pope. Paul VI could not have made a different pronouncement. He has the Gospel in his hands, and wishes to safeguard the moral law, the interests and existence of the family, and of nations. I am**

**with the Pope, at his side in all his acts, in his words and in his programmes".** (L'Osservatore Romano, Aug. 22<sup>nd</sup>, 1968).

Worship in common to some degree is now encouraged between Catholics and members of the Eastern Churches. Because all their beliefs about the priesthood and the Real Presence of Christ in the Eucharist are exactly the same, they are encouraged to go to Mass and receive Holy Communion in each others' churches when their own church is not within reach.

In a letter to Patriarch Athenagoras in March 1971 Pope Paul VI wrote that "an almost total communion already exists between our Churches as a result of our common participation in the mystery of Christ and his Church". He thanked God for everything that has been accomplished "during these past few years for the re-establishment of ever closer bonds between our Churches".

### ***The Protestant Reformation***

The Western Church remained united until the Reformation in the sixteenth century. Then that unity was shattered. Christians persecuted each other and went to war against each other. The religious divisions forced people to take sides whether they wanted to or not. One had to be either a Protestant or a Catholic. Protestants made a great issue out of the Bible as the ultimate test of faith. This made it difficult for a Catholic to appear to place great emphasis on it without it being thought that he was a secret Protestant. In the same way, Catholics stressed the importance of the Pope, bishops and sacraments. This made it difficult for a Protestant to set great store on these without being suspected of Roman leanings.

Instead of listening to the reformers to see how much was valid and acceptable in their new ideas, the Catholic leaders used the civil powers in an attempt to silence them. As a result of this, the reformers evolved further positions, this time against the Faith itself. For example, they began to deny some of the seven sacraments, the power of bishops, and other doctrines. Having rejected the idea of a central teaching authority they soon divided and subdivided into many independent groups. Protestants today are divided into about 260 independent groups.

These groups differ not only from the Catholic Church but also among themselves. We do not propose in this short course to describe their various origins and teachings and spiritual practices. Such an attempt would be beyond the scope of a course which aims only to give a simple positive presentation of our Catholic beliefs and teachings. We prefer that readers who wish to compare and contrast Catholic teachings with those of any Protestant group, would make

the comparisons for themselves between what we have explained in these lessons and what they themselves have been taught and believe.

This would seem to be not only the most practical but also the fairest way to find the comparisons for which we are frequently asked. We prefer to approach it in the spirit of the late Pope John XXIII who said: "We do not want to conduct a trial of the past. We do not want to say who was right and who was wrong. All we want to say is, 'Let us come together and end our divisions'".

We will therefore make only brief reference to a few of the better known groups in Australia as we see them today. It is cause for joy that there are some very important beliefs which all these groups hold in common with us, and which are serving as a basis for sincere and charitable dialogue between them and the Catholic Church today.

They all believe in the Fatherhood of the one true God, and share with us a deep love and devotion towards Christ as the sole mediator between God and man.

Some have views which differ from ours even about Christ himself and the nature of his work of redemption. Consequently their beliefs differ also about the structure and mission of the Church and about the role of Mary and the saints in our salvation. But with us they look to Christ as the source and centre of Christian Unity, and share with us a longing for that unity. They are united with us also in their love for and devotion to the scriptures, although they differ from us about the relationship between scripture and the teaching authority within the Church.

**Lutherans.** Martin Luther was a Catholic priest in Germany. He founded the Lutheran religion in 1521. He rightly opposed abuses and superstitious practices then widespread in the Church. But he erred in deciding that the reform could only be effected by breaking from Rome and starting afresh. He taught that all the teachings of Jesus Christ are contained in the Holy Bible, and each man can find them for himself by reading it under the guidance of the Holy Spirit, without any need for Pope or any spiritual authority.

**Presbyterians.** Based mainly on the teachings of John Calvin, Presbyterianism began in Geneva about 1541 and found its way to Scotland in the person of John Knox, where it is now the established Church. Calvinism today is divided into many branches, called in general, the Reformed Churches.

**Anglicans.** Claiming to stand mid-way between the Catholic Church and the Reformed Churches in Europe, the Church of England has retained the organizational structure of the Catholic Church. Basing the Articles of belief on

the Protestantism of Europe, it rejected the central authority of Rome and accepted its head of State as head of the Church. Today there are three branches of Anglicanism --- the High Church, Low Church and Broad Church ---- the latter sometimes called Modernists. Many groups have broken away from the Anglican Church to form independent Churches called, in general, Non-Conformists.

**Baptists.** The Baptist Church was founded in the year 1600 by John Smyth, a Church of England minister. The Baptists administer baptism only to adults after they deliberately accept Christ as their Saviour.

**Methodists.** John and Charles Wesley --- two Anglican ministers --- founded Methodism in Oxford in 1729. They formed a group of sincere and scholarly Anglicans who met for prayer and readings from the Scriptures in an effort to live a devout and methodical life. After the death of John Wesley the Methodists separated from the Church of England, though now steps are being taken to bring about a reunion.

**Congregationalists.** Originally known as Brownists --- after their founder Robert Brown --- the main belief of Congregationalists is that all Christians are priests and wherever a group of them meet for worship, there is the Church of Christ. They see no need for a specially ordained priesthood.

**The Mormons** were founded by Joseph Smith in America. He claimed to have a vision of an angel called Moroni, who told him where he would find buried some gold plates bearing God's message. In 1830 he published what he claimed to be a translation of this message. One of his followers, Brigham Young, led a party which founded a religious state in Salt Lake City. They called themselves the "Church of the Latter Day Saints".

**The Adventists** are a group of small sects who believe that the time of Christ's advent, or second coming, will be soon, and that the date of it can be reckoned, although there are different estimates as to what that date is.

**The Jehovah's Witnesses** were founded by Charles Taze Russell. They also concentrate on Christ's second coming and find in the Bible many riddles and systems of numbers which they interpret in a peculiar way. This is a rapidly growing sect which spends and makes vast sums of money from the sale of books and magazines. It sends "publishers" all over the world, who go from door to door endeavouring to make converts.

These are but a few of the many independent Christian groups today. There are many sincere Christians in all of them. No one who is alive today is

responsible for causing these divisions, but we all share some responsibility for allowing the divisions to continue. It has taken hundreds of years to begin the journey towards reunion. On this journey Catholics must remain faithful to Christ and cannot in any way compromise their Faith. Divisions which concern matters vital to faith are a cause for sorrow. We must not simply agree to differ. This would be a poor witness indeed to set before a critical world where there are millions who are looking for spiritual answers to the world's problems. We cannot rest with a divided response to their challenge. If we are to be faithful to Jesus Christ, all sincere Christians must work and pray with all their strength to arrive at a greater measure of unity among themselves.

### ***The Desire for Unity***

Good Christians have always realized the scandal of disunity. They realize how the work of the Christian missionary is seriously impeded by the divisions amongst us. They realize that these divisions are contrary to the mind of Christ, who prayed at the Last Supper that all his followers might be one. (John 17, 22, 23.) But for many years they sought to end the scandal in the wrong way.

They tried to end it by controversy and sometimes even by force. Gradually, however, they began to see that controversy rarely succeeds; that you constrain a man either by words or by force to accept your view of the Christian message. They realized that not only did Christ pray for the unity of his followers, but also gave his commandment that they should love one another as he had loved them. (John 15, 12).

### ***Religious Freedom***

All the Churches in recent years have spoken very clearly about the importance of religious freedom. Unfortunately this was not well understood or put into practice in earlier centuries. But it is cause for rejoicing that in our own time all who are seriously trying to understand the will of God and live religious lives are loud in their support of religious freedom.

The II Vatican Council's document on religious Freedom made the Catholic position very clear. It teaches that in matters of religion 'all men are immune from coercion on the part of individuals or of social groups or of any human power, in such a way that no one is to be forced to act in a manner contrary to his own beliefs'. This makes it very clear that it would be wrong to force anyone to believe in any religion which he does not freely accept.

However, the Church makes a clear and very important distinction between our right to religious freedom among our fellow men and our duty of submission to God as we know him.

Man is not free before God. The same document expresses this clearly when it says that all men are "bound by moral obligation to seek truth, especially religious truth. They are also bound to adhere to the truth, once it is known, and to order their whole lives in accord with the demands of truth".

This means that we are morally bound to do the will of God as we know it; that we all have an obligation to be loyal to what we believe to be true even if that loyalty demands sacrifice or change in our own way of life. But God does not *compel* anyone to serve him. We either respond *freely* to his love, or we accept the consequences of refusal.

A clear awareness of this moral obligation of loyalty to the truth is a most important guide for all who work sincerely for Christian unity. We may never compromise truth for the sake of apparent unity; we must strive rather to find true unity in the discovery of the fullness of religious truth.

### ***The Ecumenical Movement***

The early days of this century saw the beginning of the Ecumenical Movement. This movement reached a significant stage of development with the foundation of the World Council of Churches (Amsterdam, 1948), in which over two hundred non-Catholic Churches pledged themselves to work together for **Christian Unity**. In this Council they meet, get to know each other better, find out where they agree and discuss their differences together. They have also united in international works of charity and in approaches to world problems.

In the Second Vatican Council (1962-1965) all the Catholic bishops of the world met in Rome and discussed renewal within the Church. That Council told us what the Catholic approach to Christian unity should be. Pope John said that one of his main reasons for calling the Council was to promote unity. He invited observers from other Christian Churches, and almost all accepted. They showed great interest in its work and were given many opportunities to give their own opinions on the matters under discussion.

One of the most important documents to come from the Vatican Council is "The Decree on Ecumenism." It gives the Catholic view of unity and encourages all to pray and work for unity.

In this decree the Catholic Church makes it clear it considers itself to be the one true Church of Jesus Christ. It recognizes the existence of other Churches and communities which are held together by the Holy Spirit of God and are thus effective means of grace. But the decree shows that these Churches have all lost something through separating from the main historical tree which is the Catholic Church. In rejecting the visible structure of the Church, they have rejected something that was instituted by Jesus Christ. Therefore, it is necessary to be a

Roman Catholic to belong fully to the one true Church of Christ. The unity for which Christ prayed at the Last Supper exists in the Catholic Church. It is not perfect; it can be improved within the Church, and above all shared with more Christians. But this unity in love and faith can never be lost by the Church.

### ***The Pope, Centre of Unity***

The visible centre of this unity is the Pope, the successor of St. Peter, whom Christ appointed to be head of his Church on earth. To the bishops, the successors of the other Apostles, with the Pope at their head, Christ committed the preaching of the Gospel, the administration of the sacraments and the government of his Church. In the Catholic Church we see very clearly the unity of a single Faith and a common worship. In other Churches we find some, or even many, of the elements of God's revelation. But only within the Catholic Church can we find the whole of God's revealed truth and all the means of grace.

By baptism all Christians are made members of the Church, but only those who accept the full teaching of the Church are fully members. Nevertheless, in a certain way all baptized Christians are members and receive many of the gifts Christ has won for us and committed to his Church. Christ has used the other Churches as ways of bringing his salvation to men. Through their work and worship people receive the grace and help of God. But we must never be satisfied with the multiplicity of Churches. We must all work together to remove the obstacles that are keeping us apart.

In the Bible we find a great source of unity. Catholic and non-Catholic scholars are striving to prepare a translation of the Bible from the original languages that will be acceptable to all Christians. Through this our Christian life and united prayer will be nourished and strengthened. We hope, too, that non-Christians may find in the Bible a new source of faith and wisdom.

### ***Discussing Differences***

Here in Australia and all over the world talks are being held and efforts made to bring all who believe in Christ closer together. These are not discussions to see what truths either side can abandon so as to make unity easier --- a kind of bargaining over beliefs. That would be a very false approach. We can never abandon the truth of God as we have received it, or as we see it. We can, however, learn a better way of explaining it, or living it. Thus, these talks are an effort to learn from each other and to understand each other. By contact and discussion our view of the truth is broadened. Sometimes it becomes apparent that where we thought we were divided in belief, in fact, we are only divided by language. We are professing the same belief but using different words.

### ***Our Own Witness***

Until full Christian unity has been achieved, every Christian must continue to bear witness to Christ in the way that makes sense to him here and now. We Catholics believe that we must do this in communion with the Church --- God's People redeemed by Christ, gathered together in fellowship and government with Peter and the Apostles and their successors. We believe that God intended one Church. However much legitimate variety be allowed according to nationality and temperament, this Church should still be one in faith or it is a house divided against itself.

Believing this as we do, we must continue to preach the Gospel as we understand it, for the benefit of all those who wish to hear. We do not bring pressure to bear on consciences that do not judge as we do, but we cannot withhold what we believe to be God's truth from those who seek it. This means that while we continue to work for Christian unity, we are bound also to continue to enroll new members into our own Church. It would be no act of charity to refuse them, nor could we excuse ourselves before God for doing so.

We have to remember that the problem of Christian unity is a small one compared with the spiritual hunger of millions who have never been given a proper chance to receive the message of Jesus Christ. We cannot sit by and wait until Christian unity has been achieved before we preach the Gospel to these people. Nor can we preach to them some kind of "agreed syllabus" --- a watered-down Christianity, offensive to nobody. We can only preach to them the message of Christ as we hold it, the Faith of the Roman Catholic Church. Perhaps we do not always express things in the best way and need to learn from others. But we know that while we learn we can always rely on Christ's guarantee to preserve us always from doctrinal error.

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We do not know what the future holds for Christian Unity. It may be that it will come quickly if we are all prepared to work and pray and suffer for it. It may be that for reasons unknown to us it will remain a distant prospect. Christians may even become a scattered minority, reduced in numbers, before the final victory is achieved.

The future is in the hands of God. Whatever takes place in the time ahead, God will look after his people. As long as the world lasts, the Church will continue to give the message of Christ to all men. He promised that he would be with us all days, even to the end of the world. God will also look after all men of good will, so long as they are trying to do their best to follow whatever lights he has given them. Our task and privilege as Christians is to work generously for the coming of

God's kingdom. Our success is not indispensable to him, but goodwill is necessary to fit us for a share in his glory.

At the last Supper Jesus prayed: **"I do not pray for these only, but also for those who believe in me through their word, that they may all be one; even as thou, Father, art in me, and I in thee, that they also may be in us, so that the world may believe that thou hast sent me. The glory which thou hast given me I have given to them, that they may be one even as we are one, I in them and thou in me, that they may become perfectly one, so that the world may know that thou hast sent me and hast loved them even as thou hast loved me. Father, I desire that they also, whom thou hast given me, may be with me where I am, to behold my glory which thou hast given me in thy love for me before the foundation of the world. O righteous Father, the world has not known thee, but I have known thee; and these know that thou hast sent me. I made known to them thy name, and I will make it known, that the love with which thou hast loved me may be in them, and I in them."** (John 17, 20-26).

### **PRAYER FOR CHRISTIAN UNITY**

*Lord Jesus Christ, at Your Last Supper, You prayed to the Father that all should be one. Send Your Holy Spirit upon all who bear Your Name and seek to serve You. Strengthen our faith in You and make us love one another in humility. May we who have been reborn in one Baptism all be united in one Faith under one Shepherd. Amen.*

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**POINTS FOR DISCUSSION**

1. What do you think are the main reasons why there are so many different religions in the world?
2. What do you see as the main causes why all Christians are not united?
3. Show from Christ's address at his Last Supper that he wants all his followers to be united.
4. List some of the most important beliefs that all Protestants hold in common with Roman Catholics.
5. Suggest ways by which you could further the cause of Christian Unity, (a) in you own life, (b) among your friends, (c) in your parish.
6. How could Christian Unity further the work of Christian missionaries, (a) in Australia? (b) in Asia?