

To be Catholic is to be Authentically Ecumenical



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The ecumenical mission of the Church was at the heart of John Paul's pontificate and is at the heart of Pope Benedict's. How about our own?

CHESAPEAKE, Va. (Catholic Online) - "Nourished and sustained by the Eucharist, Catholics cannot but feel encouraged to strive for the full unity for which Christ expressed so ardent a hope in the Upper Room. The Successor of Peter knows that he must make himself especially responsible for his Divine Master's supreme aspiration. Indeed, he is entrusted with the task of strengthening his brethren (cf. Lk 22: 32). With full awareness, therefore, at the beginning of his ministry in the Church of Rome which Peter bathed in his blood, Peter's current Successor takes on as his primary task the duty to work tirelessly to rebuild the full and visible unity of all Christ's followers. This is his ambition, his impelling duty."

These words were part of the first message of Pope Benedict XVI. He has placed that commitment to working toward the full communion of the Church at the forefront of his Papacy. This is evident in his love, respect and repeated overtures toward our Orthodox brethren, whom we recognize as a Church and whose priesthood and Sacraments we also fully recognize. However, this love - of Christ and in Christ - is also evident in his outreach efforts to the separated Christians of the Reformation communities of the West. On this day when our Holy Father Benedict presided over a Mass in honor of the 4th anniversary of the death of his predecessor, the late Servant of God John Paul II, we are reminded of that giant of a Pope's passionate commitment to the full communion of the Church. In his Encyclical letter on Christian unity, "Ut Unum Sint" or "May They be One", Pope John Paul II affirmed that the "spiritual process" of ecumenism is an integral part of the Churches Mission. He also raised the stakes for all Catholic Christians.

For example he called for the use of a new language in our relationships with other Christians. He affirmed the profound significance of our one Baptism. This letter continued the teaching expounded by the Fathers of the Second Vatican Council, the ecclesiology of communion. He wrote: "It happens for example that, in the spirit of the Sermon on the Mount, Christians of one confession no longer consider other Christians as enemies or strangers but see them as brothers and sisters. Again, the very expression "separated brethren" tends to be replaced today by expressions which more readily evoke the deep communion — linked to the baptismal character — which the Spirit fosters in spite of historical and canonical divisions. Today we speak of "other Christians", "others who have received Baptism", and "Christians of other Communities". The Directory for the Application of Principles and Norms on Ecumenism refers to the Communities to which these Christians belong as "Churches and Ecclesial Communities that are not in full communion with the Catholic Church".

The ecumenical mission of the Church was at the heart of John Paul's pontificate — and is at the heart of Pope Benedict's - because it is in the center of the heart of the Lord. To be Catholic is to be authentically ecumenical. Pope John Paul wrote: "Relations between Christians are not aimed merely at mutual knowledge, common prayer and dialog. They presuppose and from now on call for every possible form of practical cooperation at all levels: pastoral, cultural and social, as well as that of witnessing to the Gospel message. Cooperation among all Christians vividly expresses that bond which already unites them, and it sets in clearer relief the features of Christ the Servant". This cooperation based on our common faith is not only filled with fraternal communion, but is a manifestation of Christ himself. Moreover, ecumenical cooperation is a true school of ecumenism, a dynamic road to unity. Unity of action leads to the full unity of faith: "Through such cooperation, all believers in Christ are able to learn easily how they can understand each other better and esteem each other more, and how the road to the unity of Christians may be made smooth. In the eyes of the world, cooperation among Christians becomes a form of common Christian witness and a means of evangelization which benefits all involved."

I am a "revert" to the Catholic Church. I wandered back home after my wayward teenage years to again embrace my deeply held Catholic Christian faith. Though this is the faith that I had been raised in, my return came after a search for truth after years of living as a "cultural" Catholic with no real integration of my faith with my daily life. Among the many questions that troubled me in my journey back to faith was why the Christian Church was broken, splintered and seemingly at odds, camp against camp, for an entire millennium. This question led me to a study of Church History. My concern for understanding the causes of the great divide between East and West led me through the Patristic literature and rooted within me my deep love for the Eastern Church Fathers. My concern over the divisions in the West, led me to study the writings of the Protestant Reformers. This study actually led me even more fully into the Catholic Church into which I had been baptized as a child and confirmed in as an early teenager.

I love the Catholic Church. I am deeply appreciative of the fullness that is Catholic Christian faith, worship, teaching and life. However, I have carried a lifelong burden to see the prayer of Jesus, recorded in St. John, Chapter 17, answered. Into a world that is fractured, divided, wounded, filled with "sides" and "camps" at enmity with one another, the Christian Church is called to proclaim, by both word and deed, the unifying love of a living God. The heart of the "Gospel" (literally "Good News"), is the message that in and through Jesus Christ, authentic unity with God - and through Him, in the Spirit, with one another- is not only possible but is the very plan of God for the entire human race. In Jesus Christ, we find communion with one another in His Body which is the Church, the One Church. In that Church we are invited into the world that He still loves to carry forward in time His redemptive mission. In His "High Priestly Prayer", the Son of God still prays to the Father, "...that they may all be one". There is a reciprocal relationship revealed in the sacred words contained in this continuing prayer of Jesus. The world will believe the message we proclaim - and respond to the invitation inherent within our mission- when we demonstrate our own unity of love with one another.

As Editor of Catholic Online, I encourage an approach to reporting that makes our readership aware of what is happening in the broader Christian community. We regularly report on the wonderful work of the Holy Spirit within the Orthodox Church. We also report on what is good, and what is challenging, within some of the Christian communities which descend from the Protestant Reformation. We do so to encourage all Christians to pray for our brothers and sisters in Christ with whom we share a common baptismal bond. Many are facing great challenges, such as our brethren within the Anglican Communion/Episcopal Church. This week we featured the horrific story of a woman minister of that community who was just named President of a Divinity School. Her positions concerning fundamental moral and theological issues are heretical and scandalous. The reaction to the story was huge. One of our readers was upset that we ran the story and wrote these words:

"This is Catholic online...this is not of the Roman Catholic teaching, therefore this disgusting article should not be printed in a Roman Catholic Publication. We don't need to know about the disgusting evil ways of this woman or her followers. The Roman Catholic Church has enough trouble with our own clergy and lay persons! We should all be praying for an end to abortion! I for one don't want to know what goes on outside of the "One True Faith... we digest enough garbage with the news, and news papers, radio, etc. Stick to the ROMAN CATHOLIC FAITH in Catholic Online PLEASE!!"

I disagree and share my response with our readers:

"I pray not only for them, but also for those who will believe in me through their word, so that they may all be one, as you, Father, are in me and I in you, that they also may be in us, that the world may believe that you sent me." (John 17: 20, 21)

"There are times when I feel a need to personally respond. I do thank you for writing and understand your sentiment. However, I do not share your belief that this is not a "catholic" issue. Part of being a Catholic Christian is having a concern for all Christians, including those with whom we are not (yet) in full communion and with whom we share a common Baptismal bond. That includes our brothers and sisters in the Anglican Communion/Episcopal Church. It is clear that this woman is in total heresy, having veered from orthodoxy. The ones suffering most from her errors in teaching and witness are our brothers and sisters within the Christian community she is a part of.

"As Catholics we should pray for her conversion, for the protection of all who are being harmed by the poison of the heresy she is proclaiming and for the Christians still within the Anglican/Episcopal community for whom we have an obligation in the Lord. We should also pray for the full communion of the Church as Jesus himself so clearly desires. The Second Vatican Council affirmed that the "fullness of truth 'subsists' within the Catholic Church". This truth makes us all the more responsible to be aware of the plight of our brethren in the "separated" parts of the Body of Christ and gives us a responsibility for them. "To those to whom much is given, much more will be required" said the Lord. We have been given so much and we are obligated as a result.

"Catholic Online will continue to report on such stories because they are an important part of informing our readers of the serious nature of the attacks on the truths revealed by Christ through the Apostles for the whole Church. This is a new missionary age and we must be fully aware of the challenges we face in order to walk into it and proclaim the only liberating truth there is, the Gospel, as fully revealed in the One, Holy, Catholic and Apostolic Church."

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