

Reconciliation and Unity*

Dear brothers and sisters.

It is, at one and the same time, a joy and an honour to be here today, having the privilege to preach the Word of God from this pulpit, at the end of this splendid Liturgy.

The Gospel of the Mass was the part of the Sermon on the Mount where Jesus proclaims to his disciples: 'If you are about to offer your gift to God at the altar, and there you remember that your brother has something against you, leave your gift there, in front of the altar, and go at once to make peace with your brother; then come back and offer your gift to God.'" Even if a full participation in this eucharistic Liturgy is still impossible for a member of the Roman Catholic Church, I am convinced that my presence here is, first of all, a sign of the grace that God is now bestowing upon our two Churches. It is the grace of fraternal reconciliation.

Yes, indeed, things are changing, and very quickly. The consciousness of the necessity of a real communion between our two Churches and the desire to build up this real communion are growing. We rediscover, after centuries of separation, that we still have not only a common faith — at least substantially — on Christ, Eucharist, ministry, Church, but also a common mission for the world.

This mission is precisely the one that the Apostle Paul described in the first reading of this Mass: 'God who reconciled us to himself by Jesus Christ has given to us the ministry of reconciliation.' God has committed unto us the *word* of reconciliation. The mission we received is to proclaim to men that they are, in Christ and through Christ, reconciled with God, but that this reconciliation remains an empty word as long as they refuse to be reconciled one with the other. In other words, our mission is to proclaim to our fellow men that their vocation is to live as brothers *because* they are the reconciled sons of God their Father. The Church has to offer them the means to live as brothers and sisters, able to praise together their common Father, especially in the celebration of the Eucharist, and to commit themselves in a common service of their Lord.

Such a mission can be fully realized only if Churches may present themselves as sister Churches. For the reconciliation coming from

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God is truly proclaimed and made clearly visible when all who are baptized and confess Jesus Christ as their Lord and Saviour live in one real fellowship, breaking the same bread. Christian division x distorts the Gospel. There is only one thing God hates: division. And we know why. He is love, and division is the destruction of love, or at least a sign of its decline. The Epistle to the Ephesians declares, explicitly, that God sent his Son to break down the wall of separation. In his own body Jesus destroyed the division between Jews and Gentiles, symbol of all human hostile separation, thus bringing the hostility to an end. We have to understand how the heart of the evangelical life is not the simple law of mutual love, but (and this is very different) the law of a mutual love stemming from the forgiveness of the trespasses and wrongs of the others. Christian love is nourished by the constant forgiveness of the offenses, Christian love flows in the forgiveness of the offenses, because it is the fruit in us of the love of Christ, who came down in order to reconcile men in one body through his Cross. Without forgiveness, Christian love cannot exist. But, without love, Christianity is a pure lie. In a word, without forgiveness Christianity loses its identity. A Christian who refuses to obey the command of reconciliation with his brothers can no longer even say the Lord's prayer: 'Forgive us our trespasses as we forgive those who trespass against us.' And the Lord himself explains: 'If you forgive others the wrongs they have done you, your Father in heaven will also forgive you; but if you do not forgive the wrongs of others, then your Father in heaven will not forgive the wrongs you have done;' 'Why should God reward you if you love only the people who love you? Even the tax collectors do that. And if you speak only to your friends, have you done anything out of the ordinary? Even the pagans do that. You, you must be perfect, just as your Father in heaven is perfect.' This is a serious responsibility; our responsibility is reconciliation. The Christians have not only to receive from Christ the gift of reconciliation. They have also to transform their attitudes and their relationships in such a way that they, too, become through Christ and in Christ, agents of the reconciliation coming from God. This belongs to their dignity of members of the Body of Christ. It is radically impossible for them to be members of Christ if they do not obey the internal law of his Body: 'Get rid of all bitterness, passion and anger. No more shoutings or insults; no more hateful feelings of any sort. Instead be kind and tender-hearted to one another and forgive one another as God has forgiven you in Christ' (Ep. 4:31-32); 'Forgive one another, whenever any of you has a complaint against someone else; you must forgive each other, in the same way that the Lord has forgiven you; and to all

these, add love, which binds all things together in perfect unity' (Col. 3:13-14). Reconciliation is first.

How could a small Christian group within one of the Churches, or a church amongst the communion of the Churches, present itself as Christian if it accepts a situation of division where antagonisms, unending strife, are still existing?

Is a divided Church still honest to its Lord if it does not try to heal the sores of internal conflicts? Has it the right to preach the Gospel of reconciliation without blushing? Christian division destroys the credibility of the Gospel. For it is impossible to proclaim, unequivocally, the power of the divine love manifested in Jesus Christ and graciously given to the believers, if one refuses the call for reconciliation. A call so closely related to the Christian mystery that, speaking of Christ, Paul might write: 'He is our reconciliation.' This is the identity of the Son of God in his incarnation.

Our two Churches are, now, discovering that in spite of our separation the Spirit of God kept in each one the same essential features. Objectively they remained sister Churches and we may recognize in one of them the features, the face, of the other. This is a marvellous grace, coming from God. For us, reconciliation does not imply a long and difficult building up on common attitudes and common beliefs. They are already there, preserved by the Spirit of Christ. We have to thank God for this privilege. *

Nevertheless, we all know that it is not sufficient to recognize the objective similitude, the objective sisterhood of our two communions. And we know that our task is not only to praise the Lord for what we are, or what we remained. The common features that we discover, more and more, in our two traditions cannot remain the subject of the official declarations of doctrinal agreements. They must inspire a new life. And such a new life will be impossible as long as our two Churches will not give one another the kiss of peace.

I presume that we are all convinced that even if the common agreements of our official commissions are accepted by the authorities of our two communions — which we really hope — we shall not yet be entirely ready for this kiss of peace and the experience of full communion it is supposed to initiate. Centuries and centuries of division, sometimes full of arrogance or resentment, cannot be superseded in a few years, and only by the decision of the supreme authorities, even if enthusiasm for unity is growing. A premature full unity would even be dangerous. It would bear the risk of being either too political or too superficial to be the real unity God desires and for which we are now longing.

The Malta Report, which initiated the official discussion for unity

between the Anglican Communion and the Roman Communion, rightly spoke of a unity by stages. Yet, looking at the actual situation, I become more and more convinced that our first stage must be what I shall call a spiritual coming together. And this celebration is probably a sign that we are ready for it and that the time to launch it has come. Now that we have become sure of our common will for unity, sure of our basic doctrinal positions, sure of our profound similitude based on a common faith and a common understanding of the main elements of the Church, sure of our common mission, we have to start seriously this first stage. It is a necessity.

Why such a necessity? Precisely as a consequence of the importance of reconciliation in the heart of the Christian mystery. The reunion of two separated Churches is not a mechanical process. And it cannot be the result only of theological discussions and official authoritative decisions. It is primarily a spiritual matter. A matter where the conversion and the quality of hearts play a prominent part, probably the leading one. Our reconciliation will be a true one and our unity a full one only if they are spiritually prepared and spiritually received. In other words, reunion has a mystical dimension.

Are we, today, sufficiently aware of the necessity of this spiritual preparation and reception of this unity we desire? It means much more than coming together, once a year, for a week of common prayers. It implies much more than inviting members of the other Church to take part in the main events of the life of our own Church. It requires much more than having from time to time an exchange of preachers. It is not realized by the simple fact of multiplying what we call the covenant parishes. All these fraternal actions are good, and we have, indeed, to proceed on this way of coming together and better knowing each other. But this is not sufficient. For the spiritual and mystical dimension of reunion is realized only when, in the soul of each community and of each member of the Churches involved, a real climate of reconciliation is created. A climate not added to the normal Christian life, but belonging to the very deep level of the life with Christ, and stemming from it. Only the Spirit of God can, indeed, do that. None the less, he will not do it without us, without our sincere quest for unity.

I believe that it is not unfair to say that, during the last years, we probably did not care sufficiently about this profound dimension of our reunification. We had a theological, doctrinal, official ecumenism. Did we have a real spiritual one? The spiritual dimension I am speaking about is rooted, first of all, in a clear Christian awareness of the supreme gravity of disunion. A divided Church is not only a contradiction in terms; it is an insult to Christ Jesus. Our pain and

our sincere will to change the situation are really Christian only if they come primarily from our love for Jesus Christ and the desire of his Lordship, not from pragmatism reasons. In other terms, it is not because the number of Christians is decreasing, or because we have to be stronger in order to withstand the challenges of our time and of our society, that we want to be re-united. It is because we want to be honest with Christ, honest with the Gospel in which we believe, and where we read: 'He (Jesus) died to bring together into one body all the scattered children of God' (Jn. 11:52); 'I pray that they may all be one, Father . . . may they be one, so that the world will believe that you sent me . . . I in them and you in me, so that they may be completely one, and that the world may know that you sent me, and that you love them as you me' (Jn. 17:21, 23). Our desires for unity will remain vain, our attempts will always be superficial or even equivocal as long as they do not spring from the vivid love of our two Churches for the Lord Jesus Christ. The question of ecumenism is fundamentally not a question of good will or of generous involvement, but a christological problem: the problem of the true acknowledgment of the Lordship of Christ.

During the last ten years the horizon of our ecumenical discussions and projects was mainly the service of the world. Our desire was to be obedient to the task that Christ committed to his Church. It was an ethical horizon. We wanted to become able to work with those who try to transform humanity, to change our world into a world of justice, concord, peace and happiness. This is indeed a real Christian task, and the faithfulness to Christ, the Lord of creation, demands this service of the world. But this task cannot be the ultimate motivation for a full, real, and lasting reunion of the Churches. The spiritual preparation and reception of unity, even if they are strongly helped by this necessary commitment to justice and peace, require more than an ethical horizon; they need a strong hunger for the glory of Christ. We have to look first at Christ. Give me the permission to use a word that, perhaps, some of you dislike; and let me apologize for this boldness. We need, more and more, a contemplative dimension in our search for unity. Unity is a gift of God so profoundly linked with the mystery of the Cross and Resurrection of Christ that it can be received only by a people whose heart and eyes are captivated by the glory of God which is shining in the face of Christ (2 Co. 4:6).

This is what William Temple, Archbishop of Canterbury, was preaching in Oxford fifty years ago, when the ecumenical movement was still at its beginning. After a quite long explanation of the role of the Holy Spirit in the renewal of Christian life, he added: 'You must

begin with Jesus Christ. The way to find his power in your heart is to be perpetually turning your eyes towards the objective revelation there given on the stage of history. Jesus is not only the revelation of the Spirit; he is the source of that Spirit to us. Into our lives, as in the Being of the Godhead, the Holy Spirit proceeds not only from the Father but from the Father through the Son. This power which develops in our hearts is the response which God calls out from our hearts by the revelation given in his Son, and you cannot know the power of the Holy Spirit in its fullness except by the companionship of Jesus Christ.' (*Christian Faith and Life*, London 1931, p. 96.) The common companionship of Jesus Christ is the only milieu in which our unity will be truly received.

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The subject proposed to the reflection and prayer of us all this year is taken from St Paul: 'hope does not disappoint us' (Rom. 5:5). How opportune this appeal is, so that we do not fall into disappointment, so that we do not remain caught up in the web of habit and stop half way. Hope is the moving spirit of the ecumenical cause. It is the star that directs our steps towards the place where the Lord certainly is. St Paul reminds those who, from the first hour, have committed themselves to the search for unity and who, perhaps with a touch of sadness, observe that the desired unity is not yet reached, that 'hope does not disappoint us' and that perseverance is necessary. He reminds those whose interest in this work may now be a matter of routine, no longer creative, that 'hope does not disappoint us' and that it is necessary to strain towards the future and race towards the goal (cf. Phil. 3:13). He reminds those who are tempted to be satisfied with the positive results already reached in the relations between Christians and who therefore run the risk of stopping at a stage of peaceful coexistence, but not of complete unity, that it is necessary to carry out the work right to the end, attaining finally the goal indicated by the Lord himself, which is that of being 'consecrated in truth' (Jn. 17:19) and 'perfect in unity' (17:23).

(From an address of Pope Paul VI to a General Audience, 19 January, 1977.)