

Keeping the Goal of Full Communion Before Us

Diocese of Orlando: January 18, 2008

By Fr. James Massa

It is a delight for me to join you at this luncheon during the week of prayer for Christian Unity, and during the 40th anniversary year of the great Catholic Diocese of Orlando. The number "40" reminds us of the Old Testament journey through the desert in which the God of Israel instructed his people in how to worship and live rightly in a covenantal relationship. One can only hope that this fortieth year will be a time of Catholics, Orthodox, Anglicans, Protestants, Evangelicals and Pentecostals, journeying together while forming new covenants between each other in witness to the communion that we already share, and that always cries out for deeper bonds of unity.

As indicated in the program, I am the chief ecumenical officer for the Catholic bishops' conference in Washington, D.C. Working with a wonderful staff of two priests and three young energetic laypersons, I help to coordinate more than a dozen bilateral and multilateral dialogues between the bishops' conference and various Christian, Jewish, Muslim, and Eastern religious communities. Most recently, one of my Jewish colleagues living in Washington shared with me his

frustrations with the political climate in our nation's capital by telling me the story of the Two Brothers, which is a familiar piece of Jewish Midrash. But then he added a modern version of the story that helps to express his sentiments about the current political scene. Many of us know the traditional Midrash-version:

Once there were two brothers, each with a farm on the opposite side of the same hill. The first had a family - It came to be that, during the harvest, the first brother said to himself, "I have a wife, sons, and daughters to help during the harvest while my brother has no one to help." So late at night, he would sneak over the hill to his brother's farm and leave bags of grain. Now, at about the same time, the second brother said to himself, "I live by myself whereas my brother has so many mouths to feed." So late at night, he would sneak over the hill to his brother's farm and leave bags of grain. One night, they happened to run into each other and each saw what the other was doing. They instantly realized what was happening, and hugged and kissed each other. And it is on that hill that the holy Temple of Jerusalem was built.

It's a very touching story which teaches that the place for encountering God is the same place where we look past our own needs and reach out to our brother or sister in concrete gestures of love. The updated version, however, reads differently:

Once there were two brothers, each with a farm on the opposite side of the same hill. The first had a family - wife, sons, daughters. The second lived by himself. It came to be that, during the harvest, the first brother said to himself, "We have so many mouths to feed whereas my brother has only but himself." So late at night, he would sneak over the hill to his brother's farm and take bags of grain. Now, at about the same time, the second brother said to himself, "My brother has a wife, sons, and daughters to help during the harvest while I have no one to help." So late at night, he would sneak over the hill to his brother's farm and take bags of grain. One night, they happened to run into each other and each saw what the other was doing. They instantly realized what was happening, and yelled

at each other and beat each other up...And it is on that hill that the United States Congress was built!

We live in a time of far too much rancor within our government and between our government and those of other nations. Thank God, it is also a time when the churches and the religious communities are finding the means to advance mutual understanding and cooperation on issues like poverty, peacemaking and protecting God's creation. For as long as the Diocese of Orlando has been around, American Catholics, inspired by the ecumenical mandate of the Second Vatican Council (1962-1965), have engaged in theological dialogues that seek to overcome doctrinal differences that wound the body of Christ and keep us from sharing the Eucharist with other Christians. The Bishops' Committee on Ecumenical and Interreligious Affairs itself sponsors eight bilateral dialogues, involving eight groupings of more than twenty denominations: Eastern Orthodox, Oriental Orthodox, Polish National Catholic, Anglican, Lutheran, Baptist, Presbyterian, Reformed, Methodist, Evangelical, and Pentecostal. In addition, our episcopal conference participates in the Faith and Order Commission of the National Council of Christian Churches, as well as the new association called Christian Churches Together (CCT) which seeks the widest possible umbrella of Christian fellowship. And these relationships belong only to the ecumenical commitments of the American Catholic hierarchy, which is also deeply involved in interreligious dialogue with Muslims, Buddhists, Hindus and Sikhs, and in deepening the unique

bonds of fellowship with the Jews, our elder brothers and sisters in the faith. You can check all of this out on our Secretariat's website: www.usccb.org/seia.

The specifically ecumenical efforts of our U.S. Bishops happen within a broader context of Catholic commitment to Christian unity, which has borne remarkable results in recent years. The contributions made by the Lutheran-Catholic Dialogue USA to the historic international Joint Declaration on the Doctrine Justification (JDDJ - 1999) are well documented. Catholic and other Christian scholars from the United States sit on international consultations that have narrowed the divisions between the Catholic Church and the Reformation communions on a broad range of doctrinal issues, from the role of Mary in salvation history to the varied understandings of apostolic tradition.¹ With the Eastern Orthodox, Catholics seem poised to enter a new era of *koinonia agapes* (“communion in love”) and cooperation in promoting cultural values. Cardinal Walter Kasper, President of the Pontifical Council for Promoting Christian Unity, calls the final document of the recent Ravenna meeting a “real breakthrough” in Orthodox-Catholic relations. “[For] the first time the Orthodox were ready to

¹ Mention International Lutheran document, *The Apostolicity of the Church* and ARCIC document on Mary.

speak about the universal level of the church,” and not simply about the reality of the church on a local or regional level under a patriarch or archbishop.²

Other new forms of association, like Christian Churches Together USA and the Global Christian Forum—which met in a plenary session for the first time this past November in Nairobi, Kenya—create opportunities for all the “families” of Christ’s household to enter into dialogue and offer common witness on a host of issues, ranging from poverty to evangelization. But even beyond these formal meetings of representative bodies of Christians working toward unity, ecumenism is being lived in tangible ways by local communities and their members. Despite the historic tensions between the confessions, mostly Catholic and mainline Protestant, that planted the first churches in Africa, Asia, and Latin America—and the new tensions between younger Pentecostal groups and these other historic bodies—the burgeoning Christian communities of the Global South seem increasingly disposed to ecumenical cooperation. Here in the United States and elsewhere, Catholics and Protestants, Orthodox and Evangelicals, marry each other, pray in each other’s houses of worship, and link arms on a variety of social causes with a degree of regularity and intensity that would have been unthinkable only a half century ago. All of this leads John Allen, columnist for the *National Catholic Reporter*, to call this historic moment a “springtime for ecumenism.” The

² “The Ecclesiological and Canonical consequences of the Sacramental nature of the Church”. http://www.catholic.org/international/international_story.php?id=25914

movement of Christian unity, he argues, is “among the most phenomenally successful currents in global Christianity in at least the last 100 years.”³ Though there are still formidable barriers to visible unity in the areas of faith, ministry, and worship, Christians need to acknowledge with gratitude the remarkable reversal of centuries of mutual acrimony and cultural separation. In what can only seem historically “like the blink of an eye,” Allen observes, Christians have assigned to oblivion the painful memories and deeply felt animosities of the past.

Given the successes of the ecumenical movement over the last one hundred years, why is it, then, that church leaders continually speak of an “ecumenical winter?” Why is there a pervasive feeling of disappointment that greater agreement on matters like the role of bishops and the authority of scripture continue to be elusive to the efforts of our scholarly dialogues? Why do local problems, like the status of Catholic dioceses in Orthodox-dominated Russia, engender skepticism about the broader intentions of pastors and faithful to seek fellowship rather than proselytism with fellow believers? How was it that a document like the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith’s June 29, 2007 Clarification on the Nature of the Church—which largely repeated previous

³ John L. Allen Jr., Weekly Online Column: Created December 7, 2007; <http://nrcrafe.org/node/1486/print>.

Catholic teaching—cause such distress among some of our Orthodox and mainline partners?⁴

John Allen finds all of this perplexing. The NCR commentator wonders whether the bar has been raised too high in the rhetoric of official church pronouncements on the goal of ecumenical laboring. For him it is impractical, and maybe even imprudent, for ecclesial leadership to hold out the “full, visible communion” of all Christians as the explicit purpose of today’s ecumenical efforts. It is unrealistic, he maintains, to think that a shared Eucharist between the Catholic Church and *all* of her Reformation partners will happen in any one of our lifetimes. “It’s a consummation that realists long ago came to regard as ‘eschatological,’ meaning something that will still be on the to-do pile when Christ returns.”

Allen poses an alternative perspective. Might it be more sensible, he asks, simply to acknowledge that ecumenism is working and that pluralism in matters of belief and practice are a permanent feature of the Christian journey through time? “That doesn’t mean renouncing full communion as a dream, but it implies not broadcasting it as the primary motive for ecumenical work, because doing so is a sure prescription for heartbreak.” Allen concludes his argument by saying: “[There] are still clouds on the horizon, and the trick is to enjoy the weather rather than longing for an utterly flawless day that’s just not in the forecast.”

⁴ Cite CDF document.

As an astute reporter on developments in religion, Allen parses sentences in ecclesiastical documents about as adeptly as anyone I know. He understands well that exhortations to seek full communion, even in the midst of ever new controversies—like those over human life issues and homosexuality—are not empty rhetoric. Allen sees that the principle of fullness of unity is a necessary response to the Lord’s command that all his disciples “may be one” (Jn 17:21). But for him the fact of religious pluralism and the loss of normative standards of authority to adjudicate truth claims in the postmodern world seem to require a more modest rhetoric, that is to say, a language that would be less likely to discourage those who have found the means have dialogue and cooperate on projects of social concern.

While I agree that Allen’s empirical reminders of ecumenical successes should not be forgotten, it seems to me ill advised for pastoral and theological reasons not to hold the vision of full communion before us as the “goad” of our ecumenical labors. The divisions within the body of Christ are real, and in view of the Lord’s expressed will for the Church *always scandalous*. Owing to the initiatives of the council, that popes of the postconciliar era have not ceased to place full, visible communion, and all that such an achievement signifies for faith, order, and worship, at the center of the Catholic Church’s mission *ad gentes*. In his encyclical on Christian unity, Pope John Paul II exhorts all of Christ’s disciples

to travel to that “blessed day” when “full unity in faith will be attained and we can celebrate together in peace the Holy Eucharist of the Lord.”⁵ The pope, whom Billy Graham called “the most influential moral voice of our time,” understood the doctrinal convergences achieved up till now through our dialogues as only a beginning, albeit a promising one given how much they have already lead to an affective and effective growth of communion. Yet, John Paul II warns, our present achievements “cannot suffice for the conscience of Christians who profess that the Church is one, holy, catholic and apostolic. The ultimate goal of the ecumenical movement is to re-establish full visible unity among all the baptized.” And of course the late pope is not alone in keeping this vision constantly before us on the ecumenical journey. The World Council of Churches, in its constitution and in repeated appeals through its Faith and Order conferences, calls all its member churches and communities “to the goal of visible unity in one faith and in one Eucharistic fellowship expressed in worship and in common life in Christ.”⁶

It is unacceptable to give up on the quest for full communion simply because the distance that must traveled gives us heartache. The story of the last forty years has been about both progress and regress. New obstacles, unforeseen when pope

⁵ *Ut Unum Sint*, no. 77.

⁶ WORLD COUNCIL OF CHURCHES, Constitution and Rules, III, 1. Seventh Assembly of the World Council of Churches in the Canberra Declaration (7-20 February 1991); cf. *Signs of the Spirit*, Official Report, Seventh Assembly, WCC, Geneva, 1991, pp. 235-258. This vision was reaffirmed by the World Conference of Faith and Order at Santiago de Compostela (3-14 August 1993); cf. *Information Service*, 85 (1994), 18-37. What is the WCC, but an organization committed to calling its member churches and communities "to the goal of visible unity in one faith and in one Eucharistic fellowship expressed in worship and in common life in Christ." WORLD COUNCIL OF CHURCHES, Constitution and Rules, III, 1.

and patriarch met on the Mount of Olives in 1965, or when Ramsey visited Montini at the Vatican in 1966, have undoubtedly arisen. In some undeniable respects, we are closer in faith and witness than we were five decades ago. But in other respects, full, visible unity seems more elusive than in those heady days of Vatican II and the Civil Rights movement, when a future Catholic cardinal, a Greek Orthodox archbishop—and hundreds of other pastors—could link arms with Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. and march for justice through the streets of Selma. The fact that on the way we have encountered unanticipated roadblocks, some theological, and some moral-cultural, does not erase the progress made—nor the necessity of traveling on.

John Allen's suggestion that ecumenism might have a more modest goal might well play into the hands of members of our respective communions who feel that theological dialogue weakens the resolve to lead others to Jesus Christ and his Church. Of course, the Catholic Church has taught for decades that dialogue and proclamation are two sides of the same coin.⁷ You cannot preach the gospel without entering into dialogue with the recipient and his or her culture. Moreover, dialogue among Christians or between Christians and persons of another religious conviction must always have as its object the truth which revelation makes known to us as the divine Son of God, incarnate and crucified. As shown by the pioneers

⁷ Reference Dialogue and Proclamation, PCID – 1994 ?

of the 20th century like Yves Congar and Michael Ramsey, dialogue is not an open invitation to inter-confessional irenicism (“our differences really don’t amount to much”) or doctrinal relativism (“it’s really the same thing, just different language”). Our core beliefs matter, because at the end of the day we want to know whether what we do and say is finally true. Catholics, Orthodox, and mainline Protestants who call for a “re-confessionalizing” of their churches and their churches’ mission need have no added anxiety over repeated reminders that the goal of unity-building is “fullness of communion.” In fact, it gives impetus to the dialogues between scholars to work toward greater and greater convergences wherever they might be found.⁸ As the CDF’s December 14th Doctrinal Note on Some Aspects of Evangelization reminds us, the more ecumenism brings about greater unity among Christians, the effective Christians will be in bringing Christ to the world.⁹

At an address last summer at the 50th anniversary celebration of the Faith and Order Commission in Oberlin, Ohio, Cardinal Avery Dulles suggested that the method of convergence, fruitfully employed in the theological dialogues of recent

⁸ What does John Paul II say in *Ut unum sint*? UUS, 79: “In this courageous journey towards unity, the transparency and the prudence of faith require us to avoid both false irenicism and indifference to the Church’s ordinances. [Unitatis Redintegratio, 4 and 11.] Conversely, that same transparency and prudence urge us to reject a halfhearted commitment to unity and, even more, a prejudicial opposition or a defeatism which tends to see everything in negative terms. To uphold a vision of unity which takes account of all the demands of revealed truth does not mean to put a brake on the ecumenical movement.¹³² On the contrary, it means preventing it from settling for apparent solutions which would lead to no firm and solid results. The obligation to respect the truth is absolute. Is this not the law of the Gospel?”

⁹ Find it in *Doctrinal Note on Some Aspects of Evangelization*.

decades, may have become exhausted.¹⁰ Dulles offers a valid caution against expecting too much from agreed statements on core issues that have divided the churches for centuries. A longtime contributor to the dialogues, the Jesuit cardinal points to successful efforts at finding consensus through a process of retrieving perspectives from scripture, the early creeds, and other sources in the tradition. But, he cautions, the method of convergence takes us only so far down the path of unity. Sometimes the process “runs up against hard differences [that resist] elimination” through dialogue and the scholarship that goes into it.

Dulles takes exception, for example, to the widely held impression that the Joint Declaration on the Doctrine of Justification, signed by the Holy See and the Lutheran World Federation on October 31, 1999, has resolved the matter of how salvation happens. The agreements in the JDDJ, negotiated in its final stage of drafting by none other than Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger, did not—and perhaps could not—resolve all the key doctrinal controversies. Dulles explains: “After stating quite correctly that the Lutheran and Catholic dialogues of previous decades had come to a basic consensus on the doctrine of justification by grace through faith, the Joint Declaration goes on to assert, more dubiously, that the remaining disagreements could now be written off as ‘differences of language, theological

¹⁰ Oberlin talk is in First Things – available online.

elaboration, and emphasis,' and therefore as not warranting condemnation from either side. It even described these differences as 'acceptable.'”

As a contributor to the Lutheran-Catholic Dialogue USA for nearly two decades, Dulles is familiar with the theological nuances of this discussion. He poses a series of pointed questions that show up a number of intractable divergences: “Is the justified person always and inevitably a sinner worthy of condemnation in the sight of God?” Catholics say no, Lutherans yes. “Are human beings able, with the help of grace, to dispose themselves to receive sanctifying grace?” Catholics say yes (when human freedom cooperates with grace, we become holy), Lutherans say no (even the so-called “saints” are still sinners in need of forgiveness). “Can they merit an increase of grace and heavenly glory with the help of the grace they already have?” Yes for Catholics, definitely no for Lutherans. “Do sinners, after receiving forgiveness, still have an obligation to make satisfaction for their misdeeds?” Yes for Catholics, for that is the whole point of Purgatory. Lutherans treat answers to this question as a matter of *adiaphora* (non-essential teaching). When one tallies up the results, it is clear that much more work has to be done on topics that pertain to the fundamental concern of the Reformation: how do human beings receive the gift of eternal life?

Of course, the JDDG makes no claim of having solved all doctrinal disputes between Catholicism and the Reformation, not even in the matter of how we

become righteous in Christ. It is no surprise that the attainment of one major solution in such a fundamental area of doctrine points up a whole set of new challenges for those traveling the path of unity. But that is what they are: challenges to deepen the conversation, enlist further critical scholarship, and find new formulations that are faithful to the basic grammar of each tradition's reading of the gospel. The method of convergence has its place in the ecumenical dialogue, but it may not be sufficient for a journey to that unity in truth that is finally freeing.

Picking up on a proposal that he made earlier in his career,¹¹ Cardinal Dulles proffers an alternative method that accords well with the tendency toward the "re-confessionalizing of the churches. Drawing on Pope John Paul II's image of dialogue as "an exchange of gifts,"¹² Dulles urges a two-fold process that involves a respectful sharing of doctrines and practices that lie at the core of one's own ecclesial identity. He calls this complementary method a "dialogue of mutual enrichment by means of witness." For example, "Catholics would want to hear from the churches of the Reformation the reasons they have for speaking as they do of Christ alone, Scripture alone, grace alone, and faith alone, while Catholics tend to speak of Christ and the Church, Scripture and tradition, grace and cooperation, faith and works. We would want to learn from them how to make better use of the laity as sharers in the priesthood of the whole People of God." Of

¹¹ Reference *Craft of Theology* – chapter on ecumenism.

¹² Google *Ut unum sint*.

course, to a certain degree, this kind of “witnessing” happens already within the method of convergence. Prior to arriving at an agreement with the other on a point of doctrinal contention, dialogue participants must know what the other believes. But in the convergence method the emphasis is not reformulation of doctrines, or re-contextualizing practices so that the other could live with them under the conditions of restored communion; rather is the purpose an exchange of gifts that hopes to elicit from the other a “change of heart”—that is, a conversion that transforms both head and heart.

As Dulles makes clear, the process works in two directions. “We would want to hear from evangelicals,” he asserts, “about their experience of conversion and from Pentecostals about perceiving the free action of the Holy Spirit in their lives. The Orthodox would have much to tell about liturgical piety, holy tradition, sacred images, and synodical styles of polity. We would not want any of these distinctive endowments of other ecclesial families to be muted or shunted aside for the sake of having shared premises or an agreed method.” The Catholics for their part “would not hesitate to go into the dialogue with the full panoply of beliefs, sustained by our own methods of certifying the truth of revelation. We are not ashamed of our reliance on tradition, the liturgy, the sense of the faithful, and our confidence in the judgment of the Magisterium.” The Jesuit cardinal saves his most impassioned plea for a sharing of the gift of the Petrine Primacy, even if that

implies a “new arrangement” after the manner in which John Paul II spoke of his office as a topic for shared ecumenical research.¹³ In an age of ever increasing fragmentation, the whole Christian household needs the office of the Bishop of Rome as an effective sign of unity so that the world might believe in Christ the reconciler.

Implicit in holding the vision of full communion before us is a recognition that we all need to undergo conversion. How else, but through a sharing of the gifts that reflect and deepen our desire for truth, can our churches and their members be led to the change of heart that signals the coming of Christ’s kingdom. Vatican II spoke of prayer as the “soul of ecumenism,”¹⁴ and Cardinal Kasper has recently outlined the multiple ways in which spiritual ecumenism can be practiced by individuals and their communities in ways that redound to the benefit of the wider movement unity-building.¹⁵ Prayer is our most potent ecumenical tool, and it is always linked to that “conversion of the eyes,” of which the mystics speak. Like the blind man in Mark 8:22-26, our interior eyes open only gradually, after the Lord has applied his balm many times to our impaired vision. None of us can see now what that fullness of unity in communion will look like when it finally arrives, for our vision remains always blurry. But what we do know is that nothing less

¹³ *Ut unum sint* nos. 80-83??

¹⁴ *Unitatis redintegratio* ??

¹⁵ Cite *Handbook*.

than a gathering around the same Eucharistic table and professing the same faith in Jesus Christ the universal savior belongs to the essence of the necessary efforts to realize that vision—which is but a part of the vision of that final kingdom that gathers *all* of God’s elect from the other portions of the human family. Just as we can never lose the vision of the kingdom that reconciles all to God as we preach the gospel, so we can never cease to strive for the fullness of communion as we work to strengthen the bonds of faith and fellowship in the body of Christ.

In his recent encyclical *Spes Salvi*, Pope Benedict XVI makes reference to the depiction on the tombstones of the early Christians of Christ as both a philosopher and a shepherd.¹⁶ In ancient times, the pope points out, the philosopher was no mere academic specialist, but “someone who knew how to teach the essential art: the art of being authentically human—the art of living and dying. To be sure, it had long since been realized that many of the people who went around pretending to be philosophers, teachers of life, were just charlatans who made money through their words, while having nothing to say about real life. All the more, then, the true philosopher who really did know how to point out the path of life was highly sought after.”

The pope then goes on to refer to a third century sarcophagus of a child who died in Rome. On this tombstone is found for the first time, in the context of the

¹⁶ No. 6 of *Spes Salvi*

resurrection of Lazarus, the figure of Christ as the true philosopher, holding the Gospel in one hand and the philosopher's travelling staff in the other. "With his staff, he conquers death," Benedict XVI asserts; "the Gospel brings the truth that itinerant philosophers had searched for in vain. In this image, which then became a common feature of sarcophagus art for a long time, we see clearly what both educated and simple people found in Christ: he tells us who man truly is and what a man must do in order to be truly human. He shows us the way, and this way is the truth."

The great witness to the truth is the path toward full communion that must be trod if we are to be faithful to Christ the good shepherd and teacher of abundant life. I sometimes think that the ecumenical movement, which historians tend to see as having had its official start in the first pan-Christian assembly in Edinburgh, Scotland in 1910, has in fact had many "beginnings." But none speaks so eloquently, and perhaps efficaciously, as the gesture of the "four immortal chaplains"—a Catholic, a Jew, and two Protestants—who in 1943 came to symbolize the hope of unity among people of faith in America. The four chaplains, as many of us know, gave up their lifejackets to panicked soldiers and then locked arms in prayer on deck as their torpedoed transport-vessel, the *USS Dorchester* sank into the icy Atlantic Ocean. The US Postal Office memorialized

the image of the chaplains in their final moment of prayer on a famous stamp, and a stained glass window in the chapel of the Pentagon captures their sacrifice.

Maybe in the unfathomable Providence of God, this was the *real* beginning of ecumenism and interreligious dialogue in the 20th century, which led in the invisible realm of grace to a pervasive conversion of Christian hearts. “Father, may they all be one, as you are in me and I am in you, may they be one in us.” The road to the fullness of unity is one marked by sacrifices, and not a little heartache, but it is also one filled with the hope that keeps us all alive in Christ Jesus our Lord. Thank you.