

## WE'RE PRAYING FOR WHAT, EXACTLY?

A reflection on Christian Unity Sunday (A OT3) by Marc Caissy

Is 8:23-9:3; 1 Cor 1:10-13,17; Mt 4:12-23

January 21-22 2017

Welcome to Christian Unity Sunday. Today's reflection opens with a classic children's story about naughty colours.

Once upon a time, the world of colours was in turmoil. Each colour claimed it was the most important, the most useful.

Green said: "I represent life and hope. I am the colour of the plant kingdom. Without me, all animals would die."

Blue interrupted: "What about sea and sky? Isn't water the basis of life? Without me, there would be no life."

Yellow boasted: "You're all so wrong. I bring light and energy, and lots of it. Without me, earth would slide into darkness and die."

The other colours bickered on. Suddenly, between threatening storm clouds, the sun broke through and scolded them: "You childish colours, you fight among yourselves, trying to lord it over the rest. Don't you realize that you are all aspects of one colour only? Stop quarreling, open your hearts and do the right thing."

Pope Francis was busy this fall doing just that. For example, in September, he traveled to Assisi to celebrate the 30th anniversary of the milestone 1986 Prayer for Peace ecumenical gathering. In October, he met and prayed with the Archbishop of Canterbury. Later that month, Francis participated in the 500th anniversary commemorations of the Protestant Reformation.

What an amazing follow-up to a recent joint declaration by the Vatican and the Lutheran World Federation. It enjoined us to acknowledge that Martin Luther "wanted to reform the church, not splinter it." "After five centuries, the declaration noted, Christians may find it easier to see and experience their differences, but the world is in need of a united Christian witness, and the season for that is now."<sup>1</sup>

And so, we pray for forgiveness and unity. Why? Perhaps to solve one of the current problems facing Christianity today: the "Christian Paradox".

On the one hand, budding friendships have grown where only hostility existed before. Who could have imagined in 1965 that the American Bishops' Committee on Ecumenism would hold meetings in the headquarters of the Evangelical Lutheran Church? Christians everywhere are finding more opportunities to pray together and engage in joint projects to help the poor and needy. These bonds are, in the words of an eminent Vatican ecumenical expert, "The true fruits...even more important than the fruits gathered in (official) documents. We have rediscovered ourselves as brothers and sisters in Christ."<sup>2</sup>

On the other hand, the prospect of full unity between Christian communities seems more distant now than at the end of Vatican II. For example, in the Anglican Communion, the ordination of female priests in the USA led to the consecration of the first female bishop in 1989. What were considered major steps in the right direction by many, appeared to others as further obstacles to forgiveness and unity. Meanwhile, tensions increased in our own all too fractured Catholic world.

Why pray for forgiveness and unity today? Because we believe that the deep unity mentioned in today's 2<sup>nd</sup> Reading cannot be the result of human strategies only. Christian denominations will forgive each other only by "looking to the mind and heart of Christ" (Phil 2:5). And so, "We all journey together, fraternally, on the road towards unity, bringing it about even as we walk, the unity which comes from the Holy Spirit and brings us something unique, which only the Spirit can do, that is, reconciling our differences."<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>1</sup>*From Conflict to Communion*, joint 2013 Vatican/World Lutheran Federation document issued on the up-coming 2016 commemorations of the 500th anniversary of the Protestant Federation.

<sup>2</sup>Card. Walter Kasper, Secretary Emeritus of the Pontifical Council for Promoting Christian Unity.

<sup>3</sup>*Pope Francis*, homily at Vespers on the Solemnity of the Conversion of St. Paul, Jan 2014.

Why pray for forgiveness and unity today? Because, “the love of Christ compels us” (2 Cor 5:14) to seek forgiveness

- *for our hatred and contempt for one another,*
- *for denouncing and falsely accusing one another,*
- *for perpetuating broken communion among our churches, etc.*<sup>4</sup>

Can we hope to share the Eucharist together one day? Yes we can, if we humbly seek the “great light” announced by the prophet Isaiah. We Christians must pray that the Light of the world dawns on us ALL. Then, like the apostles in today’s Gospel, we can proclaim the Good News: “The Lord waits for us ALL accompanies us ALL, and is with us ALL on our path toward unity.”<sup>5</sup>

The path ahead is challenging. It involves a multitude of Churches and spans generations. However, our introductory tale of many colours gifts us with an ancient sign of reassurance.

After the colours calmed down, the sun spoke up: "From now on, after it rains, each of you will stretch across the sky in a great bow of colour. Let it be a reminder of the Spirit's creativity in stimulating our combined efforts toward forgiveness and unity."

Instead of cursing the darkness, let us proclaim the Light that already shines on us. Enfolded in Christ's love, let us pray once again and always, that “all may be one” (John 17:21). Amen.

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<sup>4</sup> A full list appears in our parish bulletin, from the resources for this Week of Prayer for Christian Unity, CCC.

<sup>5</sup>*Pope Francis, ibid.*