



CATHOLIC BISHOPS' CONFERENCE

Prayer for Christian Unity

Archbishop Bernard Longley's Address

NORTHAMPTON CATHEDRAL, 21 JANUARY 2015

Let the peace of Christ rule in your hearts, to which indeed you were called in the one body.

Tonight I want first to express my thanks to the Cathedral Dean and to Bishop Peter for inviting me to join you at this Service to mark the 50th Anniversary of *Unitatis Redintegratio*. I am delighted to join you here in prayer and to preach during the Octave of Prayer for Christian Unity. I also thank the Church Leaders together with the clergy and their Church members and parishioners from within and beyond Northampton for the fellowship and friendship that they have shared and deepened with the Catholic community of this diocese over many years.

Whatever the particular Christian family to which we belong, or the tradition in which we find ourselves at home, we are already united as brothers and sisters because we have all received baptism into the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. Before the Second Vatican Council it would have been impossible for me, as a Catholic bishop, to make such an assertion knowing with confidence that I represented the teaching of the Catholic Church.

Unitatis Redintegratio, whose promulgation fifty years ago we celebrate, was the first time that the Catholic Church had reflected theologically on the life and witness of other Churches and ecclesial communities. It was the first time that her teaching authority, the Magisterium of the Pope and Bishops assembled together, had formally and with humility recognised the graces and gifts bestowed by Christ beyond the communion of the Catholic Church.

On previous occasions the generous and fruitful witness of individual Christians, along with the gifts of their baptism, had been publicly acknowledged by representatives of the Catholic Church. But the Decree on Ecumenism marked a real development in the Catholic Church's self-understanding and in her appreciation and regard for the work of the Holy Spirit in the ecclesial gatherings of all those called to form the Body of Christ in the world.

Its impact was to enable Catholics to engage with their brothers and sisters in Christ for the first time in a common endeavour for the unity of the Church. The need no longer be fearful that this would be regarded as dangerous to their spiritual well-being or at least peripheral to and a distraction from the Church's true mission. From then onwards our prayer and work for Christian unity was to be understood as integral to the life and mission of Catholics everywhere.

At the same time we realise tonight that *Unitatis Redintegratio* was only the beginning of our ecumenical pilgrimage together. As Catholics we had to learn new ways to pray and

engage with each other in ecumenical settings and to find an ecumenism of the heart that would enable us to deepen our ecumenical friendships with one another. We had to learn, as bishops and priests, how to value the episcopal and presbyteral ministries of each other and how to work and witness alongside one another for the common good. We had to establish and commit ourselves to new channels of communication and collaboration at national and diocesan level.

In these and many other new ways fifty years ago the Catholic Church learned afresh to listen to the will of the Lord for his Church and to seek to follow him with new fellow pilgrims. In so doing we began to recognise and gain a better understanding of our own identity as Catholics as well as gaining insights into the lives of other Christian communities. We were enabled to appreciate the part we were now being called to play in a common ecumenical endeavour.

We joined this pilgrimage towards the full, visible unity of the Church. Despite unforeseen discouragements and new challenges along the way that remains the goal of our dialogue and our work together. Fifty years ago to many that seemed a goal within our reach and now it seems more remote but it continues to motivate this journey of faith together. Through our baptism the Lord challenges each successive generation to contribute to the fulfilment of his prayer that they may all be one.

This seems particularly significant at the outset of a year when we have already witnessed bloodshed and persecution of religious minority groups ostensibly in the name of religion but distorting the message of faith. The work of Christian unity is directly linked with the search for justice and peace that lies at the heart of the Church's mission. The Church is called to demonstrate not uniformity but the kind of unanimity – a oneness of soul and of purpose – that characterises the Kingdom of God and that lies at the service of the world.

In his Apostolic Exhortation *Evangelii Gaudium* – The Joy of the Gospel – Pope Francis said:

Commitment to ecumenism responds to the prayer of the Lord Jesus that “they may all be one”. The credibility of the Christian message would be much greater if Christians could overcome their divisions...We must never forget that we are pilgrims journeying alongside one another. This means that we must have sincere trust in our fellow pilgrims, putting aside all suspicion or mistrust, and turn our gaze to what we are all seeking: the radiant peace of God's face. Trusting others is an art and peace is an art. Jesus told us: “Blessed are the peacemakers”. In taking up this task, also among ourselves, we fulfil the ancient prophecy: “They shall beat their swords into ploughshares”. In this perspective, ecumenism can be seen as a contribution to the unity of the human family.

St Paul urges us to live our lives of faith with integrity, so that what we profess with our mouths is reflected in our actions. Clothe yourselves with compassion, kindness, humility, meekness and patience. Part of that humility is our recognition that something is lacking in our Christian communities for as long as we are not fully at one with each other in our belief and witness to Christ. We are called to pray and gather in humility under the authority of the Word of God.

Our prayer together for the unity of the Church, reflecting the prayer of Jesus himself in St John's Gospel that they may all be one, also gives authentic expression to our Christian identity according to the different confessional families to which we belong. For me it is authentically Catholic to work and pray for the Church's unity, it is not an option and it

does not undermine my Catholic identity. If I neglect to do this, or I am indifferent, there is something missing from my life and my journey of faith as a Catholic. The same can be said for each of the traditions we represent.

In *Evangelii Gaudium* - The Joy of the Gospel – Pope Francis also recognises the unity that comes from our focus on the Word of God and our need to share our insights with each other:

How many important things unite us! If we really believe in the abundantly free working of the Holy Spirit, we can learn so much from one another! It is not just about being better informed about others, but rather about reaping what the Spirit has sown in them, which is also meant to be a gift for us...Through an exchange of gifts, the Spirit can lead us ever more fully into truth and goodness.

The Word of God reveals the transformation to which we ourselves are called in Christ. Time and again our Christian faith reminds us that this invitation is to enter into and share the life of God, not merely to look on and wonder at it. We are captured by the vision of God's goodness, truth and beauty and drawn to it as our own fulfilment and destiny, and that destiny is shaped by the character of the relationship we have with God in Christ and with one another.

With our shared faith and the renewed focus brought by prayer and reflection on God's Word we need to look at the world around us not chiefly as an enemy that is chiefly hostile to the message of the Gospel but as the place where God's salvation has already reached into people's lives through the love of his Son Jesus Christ. Christ sends us out into this world: Go therefore and make disciples of all nations...And remember, I am with you always, to the end of the age. As a demonstration of our Christian faith we need to find ever fresh ways to manifest the truth and love of God for the world that he made and cherishes.

As we look to the future one of the challenges we face as Churches together is not so much that the truth and love of God and the values offered by Christianity are being ignored or rejected, but that our own attempts to express and share our faith fail to move people sufficiently, especially when they see our divisions. Only by allowing ourselves to be transformed together can we hope to give a more credible witness to the Christ who sends us into the world and longs to walk beside us there.

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