

# Christian Unity . . . Welcoming the Future

To welcome a New Year is to embrace the future. 1976 is still fresh and new to us, full of possibilities and hope. The same must be said of the ecumenical movement which is still in its youth. It is little more than ten years now since we first glimpsed our own role as Roman Catholics in the quest for Christian unity. The Fathers of the Second Vatican Council opened a new chapter for us with the publication of the Decree on Ecumenism. It was truly a moment of grace—a brave acceptance of the future. The document looks ahead to a new land . . . as yet unvisited, and it ends on a note of openness to the Spirit's lead. The hope is that these early initiatives will "go forward without obstructing the ways of Divine Providence and without prejudging the future inspirations of the Holy Spirit."



As we plunge into the New Year it is fitting that we affirm our own personal commitment to this struggle into the future. Again this year, we mark the Week of Prayer for Christian Unity, January 18-25. The theme of this year's unity celebration is, "We shall be like Him." It is taken from the beautiful passage of John in which he speaks of the love which banishes fear. Often we are afraid of the future to which God is pointing us. But John assures us, "We are God's children; what we shall be has not yet been disclosed but we know that when it is disclosed we shall be like Him, because we shall see Him as He is." (1 Jn. 3:2)

Sometimes the trials and tensions of the present blind us to the progress made and the possibilities still ahead of us. Adult Education courses, social action, prayer, pulpit exchanges, sharing of facilities, ministerial associations, living room dialogues, committees of every variety, covenanted parishes, ecumenical agencies of all sorts, seminary clusters . . . all these have happened over the past ten years. Yet, despite all this there are still signs of our old habits of isolation and apathy. It is always easier to live with those who share our insights and our traditions. It is also easier to leave ecumenism to someone else . . . to the "professionals." "Leave it to the experts; don't bother us," is the cry of both laity and clergy. When we look at the road still ahead of us, at the work still to be accomplished in the name of unity, our efforts to date seem very humble.

Ecumenism is not the concern of ecumenists alone, any more than health is the concern only of physicians. Unity must be part of our thinking, part of our constant hope for the future. Ecumenism is central to the Church's mission and everyone must be part of the action. The Council Fathers made this clear.

"The concern for restoring unity involves the whole Church, faithful and clergy alike. It extends to everyone, according to the talent of each, whether it be exercised in daily Christian living or in theological and historical studies. This concern itself already reveals to some extent the bond of brotherhood existing among all Christians, and it leads toward full and perfect unity, in accordance with what God in His kindness wills." (Decree on Ecumenism, Chap. II, #5)

The ecumenical movement has come a long way. There are many positive signs of health and growth. This past Summer the Vatican Secretariat for the Promotion of Christian Unity released a very hopeful text on **Local Ecumenism** (July 7, 1975). It speaks of a growing "pressure of the ecumenical movement which more and more compels Christians to dialogue, common prayer, practical collaboration and common witness." The document reviews the many forms ecumenism has taken around the world and underlines the role of the local Church.

"Ecumenism on the local level is a primary element of the ecumenical situation as a whole. It is not secondary nor merely derivative. It faces specific needs and situations and has its own resources. It has an initiative of its own and its task is a wider one than merely implementing worldwide ecumenical directives on a small scale." ("Local Ecumenism" July 1975, Chap. 2)

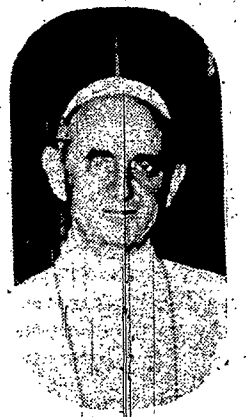
Our search for Christian unity is a continuing pilgrimage into a new land. We must respect the past but we cannot forget the goal still ahead of us. To walk the journey by ourselves would indeed be a fearful undertaking but we have the promise of the Spirit Who is always with us and leads us into the future with all its risks.

The 1976 Week of Prayer for Christian Unity affords us a special time of grace. I call upon all God's People in the Church of Rochester to seize this opportunity. Christian unity is one of the foremost demands the Spirit makes of the churches today. May the Week of Prayer serve as a new beginning of ecumenical sharing in our parishes and communities all through 1976. Together, we must welcome the future. "What we shall be has not yet been disclosed but we know that when it is disclosed we shall be like Him." (1 Jn. 3:2)

## Younger Generation Are Hearing the Word

Following is the annual Urbi et Orbi message delivered by Pope Paul VI on Christmas Day.

"Listen, I bring you news of great joy, a joy to be shared by the whole people. Today . . . a saviour has been born to you; he is Christ the Lord" (Lk 2:10).



We make our own the angel's words that resounded on that blessed night of the birth of Jesus in Bethlehem, and we launch these words again in the world. Yes, the birthday of Christ is continually renewed in time. And from the moment that this incomparable event, which was prepared for centuries in the mind of God (cf. Eph 1:4), appeared on the dial of history, the succession of human happenings finds herein its universal design. Here it discovers its permanent meaning; here it searches into its final destinies: In the overall plan of the human race the birthday of the Lord makes a perennial date; and the Church in every solar cycle not only does well to celebrate the distant memory of that singular and ineffable occurrence—the coming of the very living Word of God among men, himself a man; that is, the Incarnation—but she does well to recall its long-since acquired relevance; the earth is still the homeland of Christ, of the Son of God who has become the Son of Man. Although he is withdrawn from the life of our senses, he nevertheless remains as the object of our tireless search, our inexhaustible happiness, our indefectible waiting for him at the end of time. He remains in silence and humility but in reality, as in the Crib, with us and for us. He stated this, categorically at the moment when he left the experimental scene of this world and when he promised: "And know that I am with you always; yes, to the end of time" (Mt 28, 20).

Christmas, the stupendous mystery of the Incarnation; the feast of Emmanuel, of God

among us (cf. Mt 1, 23) marks the rebirth of history. Here our faith has its hinge; here our understanding of the human enigma has its only key to interpretation. And for us, the sons and daughters of a world predisposed to prefer the science of man (that is, human interest) to the science of God (that is, to the contemplation of the Divine Being), Christmas has here a legitimate stopping-point in our spiritual journey: it is a satisfying and definitive formulation: in the coming of Christ into the world there is salvation. His name is Jesus and it means Saviour (cf. Mt 1, 21). And this name of Jesus Christ, Saviour of the world is hence resplendent as a standard hoisted over the face of the earth, and at every time of human life. From this forum of the peoples of the earth, which is rightly named after Saint Peter, we shall let his proclamation still be heard: outside of Jesus Christ, "there is salvation in no one else, for there is no other name under heaven given among men by which we must be saved" (Acts 4, 12).

Jesus, Jesus! The person who has accepted and understood Christmas bursts forth in exclamation: Jesus, you are the Christ, you are salvation, you are truth, you are strength, you are happiness, you are glory, you are the life of the world! "For you alone are the Holy One, you alone are the Lord, you alone are the Most High, Jesus Christ!" This will be our exclamation as the People of God celebrates in song the holy mysteries of the Mass.

But here the joyous Christmas proclamation stirs up a new drama—a drama in which we are all involved, as Saint Paul vigorously reminds us: " . . . who has believed what he has heard from us?" who has accepted our proclamation of the Good News?

Does the overwhelming uproar of a thousand voices that fill the atmosphere of modern life with the powerfully amplified words of the renowned means of social communication, or the attracting fascination of the images and sounds which transfers the language of the realm of thought to that of the senses, or

the incalculable but formidable narcotic influence of the pressure of public opinion and of political propaganda which almost insensibly deprives personal freedom of its active exercise to substitute in its place the passivity of another's domination—do all of these things still allow you, Brethren and sons and daughters, to distinguish and to grasp (the delicate, tender and true wave-length of the Spirit, the vibrant voice of Christ's Gospel, the echo of the prophetic cry that rises from the desert (Mt 3, 3)? Or is the hidden Word that, when truly listened to, resounds in the interior silence of the heart no longer heeded? Or is it rather feared, as it were, and suffocated like the recalling of a truth that one prefers to ignore?

At this point a new factor enters in and it seems to us indeed in this year of grace to be equally authentic and consoling: someone is listening! Someone knows how to accept the proclamation of the Good News, as a message of revelation and renewal. Who are these unforeseen and yet predestined hearers of the secret and determining Word? It seems to us that they are the youth. They are you, young people, in whose generation is unmasked, almost with subversive impetus, the exposure of the specious, at least insufficient, wisdom of the generations that preceded you—the generations that inoculated you with the insanity of war for power, of materialism as the only justice, of pleasure as a confused attitude toward the higher duties and destinies of life. The emptiness, young people, has devastated you, and an intimate and powerful longing has brought you back, almost unconsciously, to the sphere of an invitation that cannot be rejected: "Come to me, all you who are weary and find life burdensome, and I will refresh you" (Mt 11, 28).

At this precise point, the drama is either yes or no, for the modern generation which has shown that it has understood the possibility and happiness of an encounter with Christ. Christ is speaking also from his Crib in a way that is unmistakable, penetrating and attractive: " . . . blest are they who hear the Word of God and keep it" (Lk 11, 28).