

The Unity of Christians Must Be Priority

The following is excerpted from the address given by Pope John Paul II during a general audience in the Week of Prayer for Christian Unity.

Beloved Brothers and Sisters!

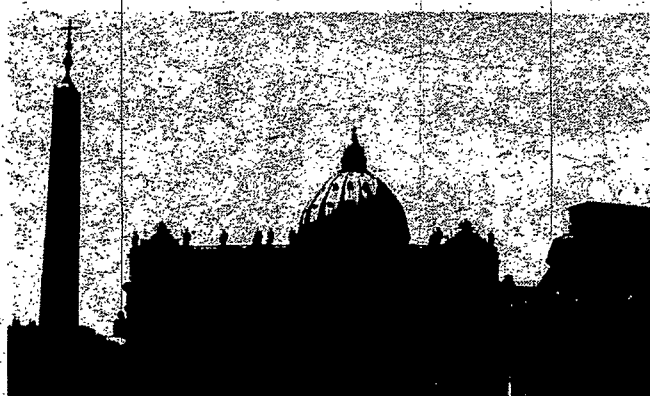
The week of prayers for the unity of Christians, calls us once more to reflect, and to pray more intensely for the perfect re-establishment of the full unity of all Christians. Every year that passes makes unity more urgent. And this special week of prayers becomes, as it were, the annual opportunity for an examination of conscience before the Lord.



But if it inevitably shows that unity, unfortunately, is not yet reached and divergences remain among Christians, it also indicates, however, that the Lord and the Holy Spirit are present and operative among Christians, who prove to be more and more attentive to the question of unity.

Particularly in this week, Catholics, Orthodox and Protestants meet to pray together. This placing of ourselves before the Lord in this way is already a positive reply to his appeal for unity and is the expression of the common will and the common commitment to continue, in obedience of faith, towards full unity.

However the pursuit of unity, and especially prayer, must be binding on all of us, because, as the Second Vatican Council stated, "The concern for restoring unity involves the whole Church, faithful and clergy alike. It extends to everyone, according to the talent of each." For this reason, in my Apostolic Exhortation on catechesis, according to the suggestions made by the Synod of Bishops in 1977, I thought it necessary to stress the importance of ecumenical formation. In fact, "catechesis cannot remain aloof from this ecumenical dimension, since all the faithful are called to share,



according to their capacity and place in the Church, in the movement towards unity."

Christ proclaims the coming of the Kingdom and calls to conversion: "Repent, for the Kingdom of heaven is at hand." He sets free from the slavery of evil, from sin: "If it is by the finger of God that I cast out demons, then the kingdom of God has come upon you." Christ cures and rehabilitates man; he dies and rises again, because he came "to give his life as a ransom for many;" and he pours upon his disciples the Spirit promised by the Father. In this way he sets up a new community of those who have accepted his lordship: The Church. He founded the Church in unity in order that she may be a sign and instrument of the Kingdom of God.

The division between Christians is an event contrary to the requirements of the Kingdom of God, opposed to the very nature of the Church which is the beginning and instrument of this Kingdom. Furthermore, division dims the proclamation of the Kingdom of God, it hinders its efficacy, making its witness weaker. "It damages that most holy cause, preaching of the Gospel to every creature," the conciliar Decree on Ecumenism affirmed.

That comes from the fact that traces of sin remain among Christians, that the requirements of the

Kingdom are not fully realized. It is precisely for this reason that the Second Vatican Council, in dealing with the exercise of ecumenism, spoke of the necessity of interior conversion, renewal of the mind, holiness of life, the necessity of public and private prayer, and of the renewal of the Church as increased faithfulness to her own vocation.

These requirements for the pursuit of unity are the same as those needed for the realization of the Kingdom of God: the Church in fact is on her way to the fullness of the Kingdom.

But the Kingdom of God is established in the concrete history of men. How can we pass over in silence the fact that in this modern age of ours, human rights are violated? In various countries terrorism is growing, anxiety and fear are increasing. Well, it is also in these concrete situations that the coming of His Kingdom must be proclaimed, in order to change them not only into places of peaceful coexistence, but even more of communion of life, in mutual respect and service of one another.

The Kingdom of God, St. Paul wrote to the first Christians of Rome, "is righteousness and peace and joy in the Holy Spirit."

We who believe in Jesus Christ, in whom the Kingdom of God is manifested, are called to become architects of reconciliation, pacification and brotherhood, among men. We are called to be heralds of the Kingdom of God. But precisely for this reason there is felt more deeply the urgent necessity of the re-establishment of full unity among Christians, which will make them able to bear a more and more effective witness and to proclaim with greater credibility the coming of the Kingdom.

STEWARDSHIP

The Idea Is Catching On Across the Country

By Beth Spring

Washington (RT) — No matter how you frame it, the image of Christian stewardship that emerges these days is focused sharply on personal commitment.

From the evangelicals' emphasis on being born again to a social gospel of Christian responsibility to a world in need, church officials of every persuasion concur that individual levels of understanding and response are the only ingredients that matter in promoting Christian accountability for money, time and energy.

"Don't try to raise money in a vacuum," Nordan C. Murphy cautions member denominations of the National Council of Churches. As executive director for the NCC's Commission on Stewardship, Murphy said he finds the greatest response to appeals for support arises "out of an understanding of who we are in relation to God as the Creator and giver of all things. He laid the responsibility on us to meet the needs of a world that is hurting."

Murphy pointed to the heartrending needs of the Vietnamese, Cambodians, and Guatemalans of late that he said have generated very generous responses "especially from those who have a biblical understanding of humanity."

A similarly personal, but more spiritual angle on stewardship was expressed by Frank Doyle, director of

finance and administration for the U.S. Catholic Conference. "We ought to be stressing the biblical foundations of our faith," he said. "We have lots of programs, but too often we put the cart before the horse."

A successful initiative for improving stewardship among Catholics might start with "giving the Bible a central place in the home, with emphasis on families reading it and discussing it. Stewardship begins with knowledge of the Bible," Doyle remarked.

By "stewardship," Doyle made it clear he meant more than just monetary contributions from families to local parishes. Commitments of time and effort — as well as charitable contributions to causes outside the church — often "do not have a high priority in the budgets of many families."

But Doyle expressed optimism that "a successfully introduced stewardship campaign could result in lots of giving. We have a lot to learn from the Protestants on this front."

Doyle might find it instructive to take a lesson from the Protestants, who denominate themselves as "evangelical." A recent Gallup Poll conducted for Christianity Today found 46 percent of evangelicals tithe ("give one-tenth or more of their income to the church or religious causes"), while just 8 percent of nonevangelicals make such a commitment.

"Stewardship is more than a program. It is part of the whole fabric of church life. You can't just take four weeks out of the year and push stewardship," according to the Rev. Edward J. Hales, pastor of the First Baptist Church in Wheaton, Ill.

Formerly field services director for the National Association of Evangelicals and head of general stewardship for the Southern Baptist Convention, Hales said "many churches have approached stewardship as a program of raising money instead of something that flows out of a lifelong commitment to Jesus Christ. I don't know how any church organization is going to make it unless it bases itself firmly on the Scripture."

Hales explained that in practice, this concept emanates from the pulpit. In his church, he said his preaching is based on a systematic progression through individual books of the Bible. "As you go through the Bible, you naturally come across passages that are tailor-made for preaching stewardship."

"It's hard work," Murphy acknowledged, but he said the process can be "the most exciting thing that can happen," especially as involvement levels transcend mere check writing and include commitments of time and energy.

Murphy reports a very positive response from the participating churches, many of which said they "didn't believe in miracles but now they do." The concept "works better for small congregations

than anything we've tried before," he said.

A Catholic church in Fairfax City, Va., experimented with encouraging tithing over the course of a decade. All the "nickel and dime" fundraising efforts common to many parishes were suspended, and "tithing off the top as a spiritual commitment" was suggested, according to a parishioner who served on the parish council at the time.

Members were asked to give half their tithe to the church and donate the other half to the charitable cause of their choice. The church tithed its own receipts to "a poor mission parish in Guatemala," which sent periodic reports about its progress.

While the parishioner reported that most people favored the new system, "some didn't like it because they felt left out. They liked running fundraising drives." About one third of the parish took part in the program.

This emphasis on tapping spiritual resources as a basis for giving reached more deeply not only into the pockets but also the lifestyles and priorities of the churchgoers, which is an area Hales believes needs to be stressed more emphatically.

"Jesus talked about material things — about lifestyles — very much," so the Christian's commitment should not be limited to monetary contributions. "Stewardship is inseparably linked to the fabric of the Christian life," he concluded.

Pope John Paul II has spoken!



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