

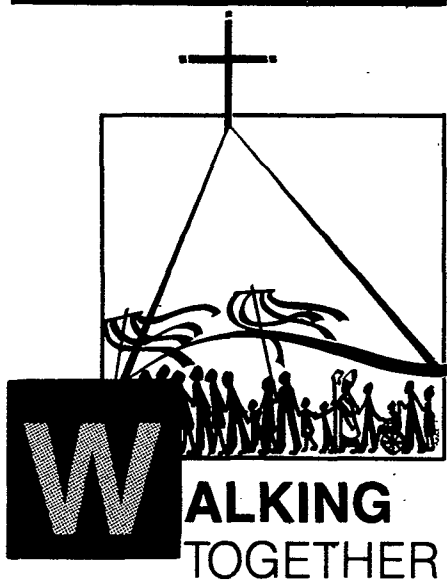
# Synod must reaffirm ecumenism

By Msgr. William H. Shannon  
Guest contributor

One of the tasks that the Catholic Church has to face is the way we deal with other Christian Churches. Our record from the Reformation's time until at least the 1950s is not something about which we would want to boast. It was not until Pius XII's time that other Christians were acknowledged even as "our separated brethren" and not until Vatican II that they were accepted as constituting "Christian Churches."

This expanding of our understanding concerning who has Christian faith means that we can no longer "keep Jesus to ourselves." Since, as the Risen one, he is able to touch the life of every person born into this world, we dare not try to fence him in. We can no longer think (as we once did) that he acts only in the Catholic Church. We cannot ever restrict his saving actions to the sacraments of Christian faith.

We must acclimate ourselves to the fact that Jesus can save through other religions: indeed, not only through other Christian religions, but also through those that are not Christian. Even though there may be imperfections and errors in these religions (and we must not forget that we also have our share of imperfections and errors), we must recognize that there



can be much good in them and that God can act through them to bring people to salvation.

This means that when we pray for people's conversion, our prayer's essential element must be for their conversion to God. This is not to minimize the church's value and importance and the precious gift it is to us — a gift for which we can never thank God sufficiently. What it means is that we cannot absolutize the church. *God alone is absolute.* This is the posture we must take if we expect to work for true Christian unity.

For a long time we have had a smug notion of what Christian unity

meant and how it could be achieved. We believed we had the whole truth and that other Christians — if they wanted to achieve unity of faith — were obliged to "come back" to us.

I can remember, several decades ago, going to Colgate Rochester Divinity School's campus. I am ashamed now to recall that I felt like I was going into "enemy territory." Now our Catholic ministry school, St. Bernard's Institute, is located on that same campus! And I, moreover, have had the privilege a number of times of speaking in the Divinity School's halls. Since the Second Vatican Council we have come a long way in appreciating other Christian Churches' Christian heritage and their members' deep Christian commitment.

One of the realities the Synod must face is the "scandal" of disunity that exists among those who profess that "Jesus is Lord." Christ's call to discipleship cannot be effectively proclaimed, as long as Christians are divided from one another.

I hope that the Synod will reaffirm — in the strongest way possible — our commitment to the ecumenical movement. Our local church must be in contact with other Christian Churches both at the institutional and "grass-roots" levels. We must assume the responsibility of becoming better acquainted with our sisters and brothers in those churches. We

need, too, to acquire the humility to realize that we must not, on our own, presume to dictate the agenda that must be dealt with to reach Christian unity. Unity will never be achieved just on our terms. An honest dialogue and earnest prayer must occur.

Dialogue is very different from debate. During a debate you try to "batter" some one down by verbal arguments. Your intent is to prove that he or she is wrong. A dialogue is a very different experience. Etymologically the word comes from the Greek preposition *dia*, which means "across," and the Greek verb *legein*, which means "to speak." In a dialogue you "speak across" the "space" of the differences that may exist between you. You do so in order to reduce that "space."

Dialogue's purpose is to share, to listen to the other, to be open to what the other has to say. And it is often surprising how different another person's position appears when she or he explains it from what I thought it to be when I expressed it in my words.

Prayer remains an important road for reaching Christian unity. We must do all we can to prepare the way for that unity. But we can never forget that, in the words of the new Catechism of the Catholic Church, "the movement to recover the unity of all Christians is Christ's gift and the Spirit's call." (820)

# Nothing is to be preferred to eternal life

By Father Albert Shamon  
Courier columnist

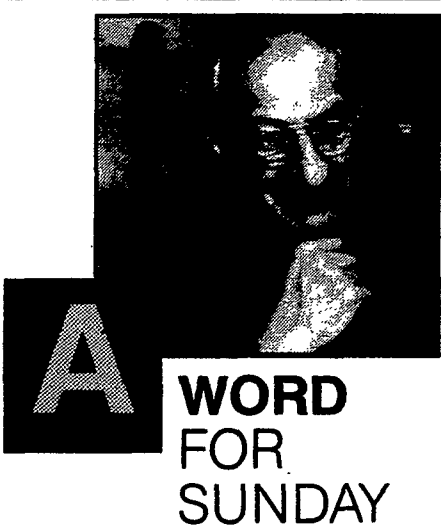
Sunday's Readings: (R3) Matthew 13:44-52; (R1) 1 Kings 3:5, 7-12; (R2) Romans 8:28-30.

Suppose God appeared in a dream and said to you, as He did to Solomon, "Ask something of me and I will give it to you." What would you ask for? Health? Wealth? Power? Long life? Solomon asked for wisdom to govern justly and kindly for he was a young lad.

After St. Thomas Aquinas defended the Eucharist, Jesus said to him, "You have written well, Thomas, ask me for what you will." Thomas answered, "To love you more!"

Solomon got his wisdom, but his life story did not end so well. Thomas got his love of God and his life story ended in his becoming a saint.

If you got all the world's riches; if, like Dorian Gray of Oscar Wilde's novel, you never lost your youth; if, like Dr. Faustus in Christopher Marlowe's play, you were given everything your eye delighted in seeing and your heart desired in having; if, in the end, you lost your immortal soul — what good would all this have



been? "What profit is there for one to gain the whole world and forfeit his life?" (Mk 8:36).

The two parables in Sunday's Gospel tell us that absolutely nothing is to be preferred to eternal life. As a person would be a fool not to purchase, if he could, a field that had oil in it, or a gem that was priceless, so are we if we do not give our eternal salvation top priority.

In the parable of the treasure hid in

the field, the man discovers wealth by accident. Simon of Cyrene stumbled across Christ while coming to Jerusalem to celebrate Passover. So too many people find Christ by striving to do their religious duties.

In the parable of the pearl, the merchant found the priceless pearl only after a diligent search. Nicodemus and Joseph of Arimathea found Jesus, because they were sincerely looking for the truth.

God has given us minds: He expects us to search for the truth. No person has the right to say, "It doesn't matter what I believe," or "one religion is as good as the other." If this were so, Jesus would never have been born, for the Jews had one of the greatest religions in the ancient world. The Holy Spirit would never have sent Peter to the god-fearing Cornelius; nor Paul to the Gentiles, many of whom were religious men and women.

G.K. Chesterton said, "No man has a right to his own opinion anymore than he has a right to a free glass of beer."

Besides our minds, God has given us wills. He expects us to seek the good. So many times people set their

own rules of conduct. For so many good means doing as I please, or as society or the mass media dictates. Morality is outside us and above and beyond all society. The standard of good and bad rests upon doing God's will or not doing it. It is simple as that.

Common to both parables is the fact that both men sold all they had to get all they found. Christianity costs, demands sacrifice. A convert of mine once said to me, "Father, ever since I became a Catholic I've had one cross after the other."

I answered, "What did you expect. The heart of Christianity is the cross. Before you became a Catholic, God spared you because you would not know what to do with a cross. You would have wasted suffering. Then, too, Satan wants to discourage you, so he literally raises hell with you. But remember, the cross accepted is redemptive."

Finally, in both parables, the men made their discoveries while doing their jobs: one plowing as a farmer does; the other buying and selling as a merchant does. So grace and opportunities come to us when we are engaged in trying to do our daily work well.



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