

COLUMNISTS

Churches unite in prayers for Christian unity

The Week of Prayer for Christian Unity is observed annually from Jan. 18-25. It was originally called "the church unity octave," held between the feasts of the Confession of St. Peter (observed by Anglicans and Lutherans) and the Conversion of St. Paul (celebrated by Roman Catholics and Anglicans).

The prayers were developed each year by an international team of liturgists, biblical scholars and pastors representing Roman Catholicism, Protestantism and Orthodoxy. It has been estimated that millions of people participate in some 75 countries throughout the world.

The purpose of this observance and indeed of the ecumenical movement generally is the restoration of the unity of the church, severely ruptured in the East-West schism (1054) and the Protestant Reformation of the 16th century.

The ecumenical movement had its origins within Protestantism in the early 20th century. In 1910 a world missionary conference in Edinburgh, Scotland, acknowledged that the divisions within Christianity were "contrary to the will of Christ" but insisted that our "unity in Christ and fellowship in the Holy Spirit is deeper than [those] divisions."

In 1920 the Orthodox-patriarchate in Constantinople urged the creation of a permanent institution of fellowship and cooperation among the churches. How-



essays in theology

BY FATHER RICHARD P. MCBRIEN

ever, the proposal did not begin to take shape until after the outbreak of World War II in which nominally Christian nations were pitted against one another.

An International Missionary Council was founded in 1921 as a forum of Protestant national councils of mission agencies in Europe and North America, and local councils of churches in Africa, Asia and Latin America.

Two other ecumenical initiatives were soon launched: the Life and Work movement (1925), which emphasized the pastoral activity of the church in the social order, and the Faith and Order movement (1927), which focused on doctrine, sacraments and church governance.

In 1948 the World Council of Churches (147 Protestant, Orthodox and Anglican churches) came into being and continues in full vigor today.

The official Catholic response to these

initial developments was skepticism and wariness. Pope Pius IX's 1928 encyclical, *Mortalium animos*, warned against religious indifferentism — the assumption that one religion is as good as another.

For the pope, unity was not a matter of "restoration" but of "return" — the return of heretics and schismatics to the one, true (Catholic) church of Christ.

Pius XI discouraged Catholic participation in this nascent ecumenical movement lest it give the impression that Catholics were on the same level with Protestants, Orthodox and Anglicans, in quest of the one, true church. This remained official policy until the pontificate of John XXIII and the opening of the Second Vatican Council.

The council's Decree on Ecumenism shifted the focus from "return" to "restoration," saying the one church of Christ already exists, albeit in a divided state. The purpose of the ecumenical movement is to discover ways of restoring unity and coming closer together in Christ through the Holy Spirit.

As ecumenical contacts increased, it became clear that the pre-conciliar axiom, "doctrine divides, action unites," needed revision. The many bilateral and multilateral dialogues, at both national and international levels, disclosed an extraordinary measure of common ground on matters of doctrine, such as the Re-

formation issue of justification by faith.

But the churches found themselves at odds in the areas of personal and social ethics, for example, abortion, euthanasia, homosexuality (a particularly divisive issue), women's rights and various matters related to peace, human rights and the economy.

There have been some recent attempts at forging new types of alliances between divided Christians, prompted more by common political interests than by theological or ecclesiastical considerations. Perhaps the clearest example was the effort in the 1990s to build a coalition in the United States of evangelical and fundamentalist Protestants with conservative Catholics. At least one joint statement was issued, but without any discernible long-term effect.

Against the background of some 20 centuries of Christian history, the ecumenical movement is relatively young. The Catholic Church has been an official part of it for only the past 40 years.

As we approach yet another Week of Prayer for Christian Unity, we may give thanks for the enormous progress that has already been made but, from another perspective, the great work of unity has only just begun.

Father McBrien is a professor of theology at the University of Notre Dame.

Feast at Cana shows abundance of Christ's grace

2nd Sunday of the Year (Jan. 14): (R3) John 2:1-11; (R1) Isaiah 62:1-5; (R2) 1 Corinthians 12:4-11.

Cana is a village quite near to Nazareth. The wedding feast there could well have been of some relatives of Joseph or Mary. At least Mary had a special place at the wedding. She seemed to have had something to do with the arrangements. She could order the servants about.

A wedding feast was a joyful occasion. And in those days when work was unending, such a feast was a welcomed break in the drudgery of life. But at this wedding feast at Cana something went wrong. The wine ran short. Wine was essential for the joy of the feast. To run out of wine would have cut the festivities short and deeply embarrassed the bride and groom.

Mary grasped the situation, so she went to Jesus. His reply was respectful. He said in effect, "Woman, leave things up to me." Mary did. She told the servants, "Do whatever he tells you."

At the door were six water pots used for washing hands and feet. Jesus told the servants to fill them with water. Then he told them to draw out the water



a word for sunday

BY FATHER ALBERT SHAMON

and take it to the head-waiter. When he had tasted the water-made-wine, the head-waiter upbraided the groom for saving the best wine to the last.

A few observations: Jesus' first miracle was not to raise the dead, nor to heal the sick, but to save a young couple from being embarrassed on their wedding day.

Secondly, Jesus worked his first miracle in a home, not in a public forum or before a vast crowd. For Jesus, the home was a place where nothing but his best was good enough. There was no place like home, even for Jesus.

Thirdly, Jesus worked his first miracle in sympathy, in kindness, in understanding for simple folk.

The story also shows Mary's faith in

Jesus. Mary turned to Jesus whenever anything went wrong. And always he answered her. Even though Jesus' answer to her request might seem puzzling, she trusted that he would do the right thing.

Even when Mary did not understand what Jesus was going to do, she still believed in him. Mary had the faith which could trust even when it did not understand. We need trust like that, trust even when we cannot understand.

There is a legend that, when Jesus was a baby, people who felt worried or upset, would go and look at Jesus and their troubles rolled away. It is still true that those who know Jesus intimately instinctively turn to him when things go wrong and they never find him wanting.

According to the Jews, seven was the perfect number. Six denoted imperfection. The six water pots signified the Law. The turning of the water into wine signified Jesus' coming was to turn the imperfection of the Law into the perfection of grace.

The six water pots held between 20 and 30 gallons of water each. That would be up to 180 gallons of wine. What the story is meant to tell us is that, when the grace of Jesus comes to men, there is

enough and even more to spare for all. No need on earth can exhaust the grace of Christ. There is a glorious superabundance of his grace.

Jesus comes to us to turn the water of life into a new quality, like wine. Without him, life is dull, meaningless; with him, life becomes sparkling, bright and exciting.

Father Shamon is administrator of St. Isaac Jogues Chapel, Fleming.

Daily Readings

Monday, January 15
Hebrews 5:1-10; Mark 2:18-22
Tuesday, January 16
Hebrews 6:10-20; Mark 2:23-28
Wednesday, January 17
Hebrews 7:1-3, 15-17; Mark 3:1-6
Thursday, January 18
Hebrews 7:25-8:6; Mark 3:7-12
Friday, January 19
Hebrews 8:6-13; Mark 3:13-19
Saturday, January 20
Hebrews 9:2-3, 11-14; Mark 3:20-21

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GENERAL

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