

Church seeks unity with other faiths, sects

The Week of Prayer for Christian Unity, originally the Church Unity Octave, begins on January 18, formerly the feast of the Chair of Peter (now celebrated on February 22), and concludes on the 25th with the feast of the Conversion of Paul.

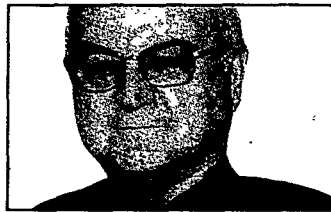
The idea for this observance was Paul Wattson's, an Anglican who became a Roman Catholic priest and then cofounder of the Society of the Atonement, more popularly known as the Graymoor Fathers.

First established in 1908, the Church Unity Octave changed over the years in line with developments in the ecumenical movement itself. The major influence in marking out a new course was Abbé Paul Couturier, an ecumenical pioneer in France who in 1934 broadened the scope of Wattson's more narrowly Catholic approach by introducing an Annual Prayer for Christian Unity.

It was, however, a unity to be achieved "as Christ wishes and by the means which he desires" and not necessarily by a conversion of non-Catholics to Catholicism.

In its Decree on Ecumenism the Second Vatican Council described the quest for Christian unity not as a matter of a "return" to some pre-existing unity in the Catholic Church, but as a "restoration" of a unity that had been lost (n. 1).

The Catholic Church, the decree insisted, does not "impute the sin of separation" to other Christians. It



Father Richard McBrien

Essays in Theology

accepts them "with respect and affection" as brothers and sisters.

The differences between us are matters of degree rather than of kind. Thus, non-Catholic Christians "who believe in Christ and have been properly baptized are brought into a certain, though imperfect, communion with the Catholic Church" (n. 3).

Non-Catholic churches and communities, the decree pointed out, "have by no means been deprived of significance and importance in the mystery of salvation." Indeed, "the Spirit of Christ has not refrained from using them as means of salvation which derive their efficacy from the very fullness of grace and truth entrusted to the Catholic Church."

One might detect here that the council could not make up its mind and so it simply placed two opposed positions side by side or back to back, without ever attempting to resolve the obvious discrepancies.

However, it is more likely a matter of dialectical tensions within the conciliar texts. This supposition tends to be confirmed by what actually happened at the council and by subsequent devel-

opments within the Catholic Church and the wider Christian community.

At the council itself, non-Catholic observers were welcomed with open arms, invited to join in public prayer with the conciliar fathers and given opportunities to exercise substantial influence on the drafting of some of the key documents.

Following the council, formal ecumenical dialogues were established and officially recognized by the Catholic Church. Theological education became more explicitly ecumenical in content and structure.

In 1996, on the occasion of the 1,400th anniversary of Pope Gregory the Great's sending of missionaries to re-Christianize England, Pope John Paul II received the Archbishop of Canterbury as a brother bishop, and conferred upon him a pectoral cross.

Four years later the pope invited the archbishop to assist him in the ceremonial opening of the Holy Door of St. Peter's Basilica to begin the Jubilee Year 2000.

These gestures were fraught with meaning and symbolism. Official Catholic norms would normally have prohibited them, but Catholic practice, even by a pope, is sometimes ahead of the rules and regulations.

It is something to reflect upon and to give thanks for during the coming Week of Prayer for Christian Unity.

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

LETTERS

Prelate did right thing

To the editor:

While I believe Cardinal Law did the right thing as concerns his resignation, I can't say that I am jumping for joy. In many ways, Cardinal Law became a victim of a top-heavy hierarchical system, in which the interests of the Pope, cardinals, and bishops took priority over matters of concern to priests, deacons, nuns and the laity. Therefore, it is difficult for me to condemn Law, despite the fact that sexual abuse cases were obviously mishandled.

In many ways, Cardinal Law is a good man and is extremely intellectual. Coming from a Judeo-Christian background, I fully appreciate all he has done to better relations between Christians and Jews. His ecumenical efforts have been equally exemplary. So, while I do feel resignation was the only recourse for the cardinal, he now has an opportunity to redeem himself by continuing to work for ideals that are at the heart of his soul, although not as the spiritual leader of the Boston Archdiocese.

Raymond Grosswirth
 Academy Drive
 Rochester

Hate sin, love sinner

To the editor:

I'm a sinner. So are you. That includes everybody on earth since the beginning of the human race including all the saints, all the popes, and

even Peter. The one exception that we know of was a fellow named Jesus who boiled the whole thing down to: "Love God and Love Your Neighbor."

Who is God? Even St. Thomas Aquinas had trouble with that one and I certainly don't pretend to be wiser than he was so I'll proceed to the easier one. Who is our neighbor? That would be every person on earth. I have not been given the knowledge or authority to judge them, just the order to love them. Because some of them are quite famous, their sins are simply better known than ours and may produce a wider effect. That does not make them worse than ours. We have been ordered to love them, not to judge them; and pray for them, not to condemn them. Father forgive them and us for sometimes we just don't know what we are doing.

George J. Henkel
 Whalen Road
 Penfield

Accept all at Christmas

To the editor:

I am writing this letter to state strong objections to the scandalous practice that has been creeping into our Churches at Christmas. That practice being giving out tickets for attendance at Mass.

The practice is a poorly done practice. It makes the Holy Mass a theatrical event and another commercialized event of the season. What should a family do when they have a ticket and an unexpected visitor has none? How about those individuals who have to change the time they would worship due to a job or other responsibility? This is to say nothing of an individual who is estranged from the Church and might want to come in on the spur of the moment.

Turning people away is turning away the Holy Family. It is time to end this scandalous practice and find another alternative.

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