

Charting the road of the ecumenical movement

The year 2008 is a special one as we celebrated the Week of Prayer for Christian Unity from 18 to 25 January. It was, in fact, celebrating so to speak its centenary.

At the same time, we celebrated the 40th anniversary of the beginning of the joint work of the "Faith and Order" Commission of the World Council of Churches and the Pontifical Council for Promoting Christian Unity. Every year, these two bodies prepare together the Week of Prayer's material and resources.

This year we also commemorated the Beatification 25 years ago, precisely during the Week of Prayer, of St. Maria Gabriella of Unity (1914-36), a Trappist nun who devoted her entire life, in the isolation of her convent, to meditation and prayer in order to make Jesus' desire "that they may all be one" (Jn 17:21) come true.

This triple anniversary prompts me to reflect on both the history and ever timely importance of the search for unity, and in a special way on the Week of Prayer and the spiritual dimension of ecumenism. I shall therefore consider the nature of spiritual ecumenism, its importance and impact, especially amid major changes affecting many aspects of ecumenism: indeed, at the beginning of this 21st century, its history stands on the threshold of a new period.

Ecumenism's birth and beyond

The birth of the 20th-century ecumenical movement more or less coincides with the World Missionary Conference held in Edinburgh in 1910; we are already working on ecumenical preparations for its 100th anniversary, set to take place in two year's time.

Edinburgh was very important for several reasons. It was the source of two great currents which then flowed into the World Council of Churches: "Life and Work" and "Faith and Order".

Edinburgh's essential contribution was to explicitly connect the Church's ecumenical and missionary commitments. Ecumenism and mission are "brothers", so to speak. Both clearly testify to the concept at the root of our own ecclesial understanding: the Church is never self-sufficient but must always look outwards and beyond herself.

The Church's ecumenical challenge is to become ever more aware of the scandal of division, which the existence of other Churches and Ecclesial Communities particularly highlights, in order to achieve reconciliation. In her mission, the Church must open herself to the world of nations and cultures desirous of receiving the Gospel proclamation.

Ecumenism and mission, therefore, also have an eschatological dimension; they strive for the eschatological *shalom*, the universal eschatological peace proclaimed by the Old Testament prophets. It is by no means accidental that the President and Secretary of the Edinburgh Conference, the American Methodist layman John Mott and the Anglican theologian Joseph H. Oldam, were also protagonists of the peace movement initiated after the tragedy and devastation of the First World War.

Yet, however important the commemoration of the Edinburgh Conference may be, we must not forget that it is neither the only nor the oldest root of 20th-century ecumenism. A hundred years ago, the then (still) Episcopalian minister Paul Wattson (1863-1940), Cofounder of the Community of Brothers and Sisters of the Atonement at Gray-moor (Garrison, New York), introduced an Octave of Prayer for Christian Unity that was celebrated for the first time from 18 to 25 January 1908. In this centenary year, therefore, it was at Gray-moor that preparations were made for this year's Week of Prayer.

But the Week of Prayer can be traced back to various initiatives even further back in time, and to movements of spiritual renewal in the second half of the 19th century: for example, the Oxford Movement, the World Evangelical Alliance, the "World Day of Prayer" of women which, despite strong male opposition, was introduced by Presbyterian, Methodist, Baptist and Anglican women in the 1880s, first in the United States and Canada, then worldwide....

It is also worth remembering in special way the two Encyclicals of the Ecumenical Patriarch Joachim III: the first was addressed to all Orthodox Churches in 1902; the second was written in 1920 to invite Churches of the whole world to join an "Alliance of Churches", similar to the "Alliance of Nations". In this document, not only did the Patriarch use the Greek, word *koinonia* (communion) as the final goal of the reunification of Churches, but he also stressed the key importance for all Christians of continuous prayer and invocations to implore the restoration of unity.

The Catholic Church was not absent. While officially supporting the institutional ecumenical movement solely with *Unitatis Redintegratio*, the Decree on Ecumenism of Vatican Council II, she participated from the outset in prayer for Christian unity and in spiritual ecumenism. In the 19th-century, when Catholic movements of spiritual renewal existed in many places, we already find groups praying for the Church's unity.

Saints such as Vincent Pallotti (1795-1850) and Fr. Luigi Orione (1872-1940), both important for pastoral renewal in Rome, as well as Adolf Kolping (1813-65) and the famous Bishop Ketteler of Mainz (1811-77), well known for their social involvement, supported and promoted prayer for Christian unity.

Nature of prayer for unity

In his 1895 Brief *Providae Matris*, Pope Leo XIII recommended a Week of Prayer for the week preceding Pentecost. He wrote: "It is a matter of praying for a work comparable to the renewal of the First Pentecost when all the faithful were gathered round the Mother of Jesus in the Upper Room, of one mind and unanimous in prayer".

Two years later, in his Encyclical *Divinum Illud Munus*, the Pope spoke of the prayer in which it was asked that the good of Christian unity be promoted. When the entire Society of the Atonement joined the Catholic Church, Pope Pius X, in 1909, gave his official Blessing to the Week of Prayer in January. Benedict XV supported it and introduced it definitively into the Catholic Church. Pius XI also encouraged it, and in his 1943 Encyclical *Mystici Corporis*, Pius XII said that he would pray for the Church's unity after Christ's example.

It is significant that it was at the end of the Week of Prayer, precisely on 25 January 1959, that John XXIII announced the Second Vatican Council which would officially open the Catholic Church to ecumenical movement.

In its Decree on Ecumenism, the Council declared: "This change of heart and holiness of life, along with public and private prayer for the unity of Christians, should be regarded as the soul of the whole ecumenical movement and merits the name 'spiritual ecumenism' (*Unitatis Redintegratio*, 8). John Paul II frequently and clearly reaffirmed the priority of prayer and the importance of spiritual ecumenism in his 1993 Encyclical *Ut Unum Sint* (cf. nn. 15ff., 21ff., 24-27).

In taking a fresh look at Paul Wattson's original intention, we note an important development in the understanding of the Week of Prayer. While Wattson maintained that the goal of unity was the return to the Catholic Church, Abbé Paul Couturier of Lyons (1881-1953) gave a new impetus to this Week in the 1930s, ecumenical in the true sense of the word. He changed the name "Church Unity Octave" to "Universal Week of Prayer for Christian Unity", thus furthering a unity of the Church that "Christ wills by the means he wills".

Paul Couturier's 1944 spiritual testament is very important, profound and moving; it is one of the most inspired ecumenical texts, still worth reading and meditating on today. The author speaks of an "invisible monastery", "built of all those souls whom, because of their sincere efforts to open themselves to his fire and his light, the Holy Spirit has enabled to have a deep understanding of the painful division among Christians; an awareness of this in these souls has given rise to continuous suffering and as a result, regular recourse to prayer and penance".

Paul Couturier can be considered the father of spiritual ecumenism. His influence was felt by the Dombes Group and by Roger Schutz and the Taizé Community. Sr. Maria Gabriella also drew great inspiration from him.

Today, his invisible monastery is at last taking shape through the growing number of prayer networks between Catholic monasteries and non-Catholics, spiritual movements and communities, centres of male and female religious, Bishops, priests and lay people.

To conclude, we can say that prayer for Christian unity and above all the Week of Prayer are the origin and constant impetus of the ecumenical movement. This observation suggests various and very important things.

First, the theme of this year's Week of Prayer: "Pray without ceasing" (1 Thes 5:17), sums up in itself a long history that dates back far beyond 100 years, ultimately to the Upper Room in Jerusalem where Jesus prayed and where the Apostles and the women, together with Mary, devoted themselves to prayer for the coming of the Holy Spirit (Acts 1:13ff.)... Ecumenism thus means making this prayer one's own, it means praying with Jesus and in Jesus. The principal and driving force of ecumenism is meditation, contemplation.

But its goal is a communion which is not purely the result of human efforts, a work or institution created merely by us. Without spiritual communion, communion's entire structure would be nothing more than a soulless apparatus. Indeed, communion is first and foremost a gift. To decide when, where and how unity will be achieved is not in our hands but in God's; we must trust him.

Secondly, prayer and the sense of ecumenism began more or less independently in the different ecclesial traditions as well as in various transconfessional and transnational circles. They were supported by them all from the very start: Anglicans, Protestants, Orthodox, Catholics, free Churches.

As Vatican Council II noted, this movement can be understood only as an impetus and action of the Holy Spirit, who has reawakened Christians worldwide and in all ecclesial traditions, making them feel remorse over the scandal of their divisions and a longing for unity (cf. *Unitatis Redintegratio*, nn. 1, 4).

Thirdly, thanks to Edinburgh and all that resulted from it, such as the "Life and Work" and "Faith and Order" movements, what had been primarily a spiritual movement could for the first time take on an institutional structure, joining the missionary commitment and peace movement and thereby acquiring a world dimension not only at the level of geographical extension but also of impact and awareness. Every year, in fact, when we pray for Christian unity, we also pray for the most important needs in the social and political spheres and for world peace. Ecumenism is thus a response to the signs of the times.

In one of the darkest and most bloodstained centuries, marked by two World Wars which took a toll of millions of lives..., Christians have decided to overcome their ancient divisions, showing it is possible to be reconciled despite the faults committed in the past by all....

As John Paul II emphasized, in the 20th century there were martyrs in all the Churches and Ecclesial Communities, people who, motivated by a profound Christian awareness, opposed the inhuman, Godless regimes and became totally committed to the quest for Christian unity, reconciliation and peace.

By generously offering their lives for the Kingdom of God, these brothers and sisters of ours "are the most powerful proof that every factor of division can be transcended and overcome in the total gift of self for the sake of the Gospel" (*Ut Unum Sint*, n. 1).

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