



# WEEK OF PRAYER FOR CHRISTIAN UNITY

Cardinal Cormac Murphy-O'Connor

CHESTER CATHEDRAL, 22 JANUARY 2012

**Two memorable events in my thirty-five years of being a bishop have been the visits of successive Popes here to our country. First of all, Pope John Paul came thirty years ago this year and I well remember, among the many other things, his visit to Canterbury Cathedral. There he said, I lift up to the Lord this prayer: O Christ, may all that is part of this day's encounter be born of the spirit of truth and be made fruitful through love. Behold before us the past and the future; behold before us the desires of many hearts.**

When he and the then Archbishop of Canterbury, Robert Runcie, walked out of the Cathedral together, there were tears in my eyes: Behold before us the desires of so many hearts. It was truly a momentous visit. Then just a year and a half ago Pope Benedict came and I remember Archbishop Rowan Williams expressing very movingly our joint heritage derived especially from the Benedictines, under Augustine, sent here by Pope Gregory in 596. This Benedictine life, so evident in the beauty and richness of this Cathedral, proved a sure foundation, not only for monks and nuns, but for the entire culture of this country and for the vision which we share together. I note Pope Benedict expressed in his own address a challenge to all of us Christians. He asked us to mend the ruptures of the past; to re-discover what we have in common and to meet the challenges of the present.

To mend the ruptures of the past is a task that devolves on each one of us here this evening. There are three enemies of ecumenism and they are suspicion, inertia and impatience. For too long we have lived, as it were, apart and one of the joys of my years as a priest and bishop has been the growing friendship that has come amongst us. For when we meet together and pray together the suspicions of the past dissolve and we reach the heart of the ecumenical movement which is a spiritual movement focused on Jesus Christ the Son of God to whom we pray and in whom we reach the Father. And, of course, we overcome inertia by what we do together. We can have many notional ideas of what we want to do but do we actually do them? In every village and every town, everywhere, there ought to be some things which Christians are doing together. It may be a prayer group; it may be an expression of social concern for the poor and needy; it may be joint Services, especially at key times such as today. There is a story of four Polish tailors. They all lived in the same street and times were bad. One of them put up an advertisement in his window which said: Here is the best tailor in the town. The second tailor came along, he looked at it and said, 'I'll do better'. So he put up in his window, Here is the best tailor in all Poland. The third tailor came along and he saw the two and in his window he put, The best tailor in the whole wide world! The fourth tailor came along. He looked at the first, the second and the third and he put in his window, Here is the best tailor in the street! But what matters, it seems to me, in the ecumenical movement, is not essentially what happens between the Archbishop of Canterbury and the Pope, yes, that's important, but what happens here? What is happening in your parish, in your area, in your village, in your town? This is where ecumenism is fruitful by the power of the Holy Spirit. 'Where two or three are gathered together in my name', said Jesus, 'there am I in the midst of them' (Mt. 18:20) There is a task to be done and perhaps, above all, we must not give in to impatience - we must persevere month by month, year by year. Ecumenism is like a road with no exit and the pilgrimage is a long one. (Story – Irish P.P.) We have not yet reached the end of the road. There is still work to be done. But we are pilgrims on our road together, singing to the Lord, asking for his help as we seek what Pope John Paul said, 'the desires of so many hearts'.

It is good, too, as Pope Benedict reminded us, to remember what we have in common. For years I was Chairman of something called 'ARCIC – The Anglican-Roman Catholic Ecumenical Commission' - and we used to study together many matters. But the key to our work was a term called, *koinonia*, which means

'communion', because there is, if not complete communion, a real communion that exists between all of us here today. How right that we should give thanks for a common faith in God our Father, in Our Lord Jesus Christ and in the Holy Spirit; our common baptism into Christ, our sharing of the Holy Scriptures, of the Apostles' and Nicene Creeds, our common Christian inheritance for many centuries with its living traditions of liturgy, theology, spirituality and mission. Yes, there are important matters that still divide us but it is surely true that what unites us is much more important than what separates us. And we all know those words of Jesus so well, 'That they all may be one, Father, as you are in me and I in you, that the world may believe it was you who sent me' (John 17).

So there is much for which to give thanks to God and much to do and hope for. But it seems to me that we also must be brave as, prompted by Pope Benedict, we meet the challenges of the present. Time and time again, together, we must proclaim, in season and out of season, the dignity of the human person made in the image of God from conception to the end of life. It means that, together, we reach out to the marginalised and to the poor. It means to be focused too on the centrality of the family. Our society is built up on the family and the communities that support the family. And, above all, together we assert that our Christian faith and all that is implied in our belief in God is alive, active and relevant in today's secular society. How well I remember the funeral of Pope John Paul II when, literally, about two million people in Rome were praying together: they remembered a life of faith and dedication and gave thanks to God for his servant and proclaimed by that faith that this life is not the end but that there is eternal life for which we are all destined. We must all proclaim bravely our belief in the power and the majesty and the presence of God which illumines life and purifies the pure rationality which could lead to a culture without hope or without meaning.

I have said earlier that ecumenism is like a road with no exit. We must never, never be discouraged. Our reading today from Habakkuk reminds us that, 'the fig tree is not to blossom nor will the vines bear fruit, sheep will vanish from the fold, no cattle in the stalls, but I shall rejoice in Yahweh, I shall exult in God my Saviour; Yahweh my Lord in my strength.' It is in God we trust. The work of Christian Unity is not just our work, it is the work of the Holy Spirit. Each one of us, my dear friends, has a task and a mission. Jesus says in our reading today, 'In all truth, I tell you, unless a wheat grain falls into the earth and dies it remains only a single grain; but if it dies it yields a rich harvest'. Our sacrifices and our generosity on this long pilgrimage together is what really matters. We should not lack the courage to offer it. Jesus says, 'Whoever serves me must follow me and my servant will be with me wherever I am.' Let us thank the Lord for his goodness. I repeat again Jesus's prayer: 'May they all be one just as, Father, you are in me and I am in you, so that they also may be in us so that the world may believe it was You who sent me'.

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