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Christian Unity: A Prayer of the Ages

Establishment of Anglican Ordinariate Marks Important Step

By Father Juan R. Vélez

LOS ANGELES, California, JAN. 21, 2010 ([Zenit.org](http://www.zenit.org)).- The second part of the 20th century and the first decade of the 21st century have shown significant developments in the ecumenical movement, the work of uniting Christians in their religious beliefs, practices and ecclesiastical authority. Last Saturday, the establishment of the first ordinariate -- a structure similar to that of a diocese -- for Anglicans who wish to be in full communion with the Catholic Church marks an important step in this ecumenical movement.

The work of promoting unity between Christians was begun by Jesus Christ, the founder of Christianity, who taught his disciples to love one another and to forgive each other their faults. He chose Peter and his successor to be the visible head of his Church, and before his death, he prayed to the Father that all his disciples would maintain the unity of the faith and thus give glory to God and lead others to believe in God. Christians, out of human weakness and fallen nature, have however, been divided over the centuries. From the first centuries, bishops and Christian writers have attempted to reunite separated Christians with mixed results.

The greatest divisions among Christians resulted in separation with the Orthodox in the 11th century, and Protestants and Anglicans in 16th centuries. These divisions had many complicated causes, including cultural and political elements, and led to greater separation. There were significant efforts to heal these divisions at the Second Council of Lyons (1274) and the Council of Trent (1545-1563), respectively, but the attempts failed.

The cause for Christian unity, however, continued because it was the last will of its founder, and because of the inner logic of Christian life. In the 19th century, the missionary activity of Christians in parts of Africa led to a greater awareness of the urgent need for Christian unity. How could missionaries preach the Gospel of Christ if they were separated and at odds with one another?

Prayer campaign

In addition to this growing desire for unity, some persons gave an important impetus to Christian unity, preparing the work of the Second Vatican Council, which gave support in a manner unparalleled in history to the work of the ecumenical movement. Among these is Father George Ignatius Spencer, an Anglican clergyman who converted to Roman Catholicism, and in 1839, began a prayer campaign for the unity of Christians. That year he won the support of John Henry Newman, founder of the Oxford Movement, who helped him to engage Anglicans in England to pray every Thursday for this intention. A few years later, Newman himself would be received into full communion with the Roman Catholic Church.

Uniting people who have separate practices and ecclesial government is a very difficult task. Newman himself did not foresee in his time a corporate reunion between Anglicans and Roman Catholics. Still, he prayed for this.

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Years later in 1908, Reverend Paul James Wattson, an Episcopalian clergyman in New York State, began to observe eight days of prayer for this intention between the feast of the Chair of Peter, then celebrated on Jan. 18, and the feast of the Conversion of St. Paul, Jan. 25, to pray for the unity of Christians.[1] Wattson, who became Roman Catholic, found approval in Pope St. Pius X for observance of an octave of prayer for Christian unity.

Soon afterward in 1916, Pope Benedict XV extended the observance to the universal Church. Other men and women followed suit in increasing the prayer for Christian unity. Among them stands out the French priest Father Paul Coutrier, who in 1933 extended the octave to those who sought a spiritual ecumenism without seeking a visible reunion under the Successor of Peter.

Through Father Coutrier's work, Mother Maria Gabriella, a young nun at the Monastery of Grottaferrata in Italy, was inspired by the Holy Spirit to offer her life for the cause of Christian unity. She dedicated herself to Christ's Prayer for Christian unity found in chapter 17 of St. John's Gospel, and died on April 23, 1939, on Good Shepherd Sunday. Pope John Paul II beatified her as Maria Gabriella of Unity on Jan. 25, 1983, the last day of the week of Prayer for Christian Unity.[2]

The growing prayer for unity and the increased awareness of this need, inspired the Fathers of Vatican II to urge the work of ecumenism to all Christians. In the "Decree on Ecumenism" they urged Christians to pray for this desire of Christ himself, and to seek greater understanding and respect among each other. The Council called for a conversion of hearts as a first requirement for Christian unity. The same year as the end of the Council a very important gesture of mutual forgiveness took place: Pope Paul VI and Athenagorus, Patriarch of Constantinople, took the very important step of lifting mutual excommunications between Constantinople and Rome.

Following in the path of Vatican II, Pope John Paul II and his collaborators worked unceasingly to advance the cause of ecumenism through prayer and fraternal gestures, and through numerous meetings of representatives of ecclesial communities as well as study meetings of theologians. In his letter "Ut Unum Sint," he urged the Orthodox Christians to consider ways of accepting the primacy of the Successor of Peter. During his pontificate there were major advances in relations with Orthodox Churches and various ecclesial communions such as the Lutherans. In recent years, the fruit of his meetings with successive Archbishops of Canterbury and the work of many has borne fruits of greater respect and friendship with Anglicans, despite important disagreement in the ordination of women and practicing homosexual men.

New development

In 2009, Benedict XVI made a provision whereby Anglican laymen and clergymen could come into communion with Rome while keeping many English customs and language proper to their liturgy and ecclesial life. He provided for the creation of future Anglican ordinariates, which would permit the incorporation of former Anglicans, including Anglican clergymen who choose to be ordained Roman Catholic priests. Each ordinariate will have its own head or ordinary, a program for the formation of priests and laity, and its own ecclesiastical tribunal. This new development in the history of Christianity constitutes an important step in the path of Christian unity.

On Saturday, Jan. 15, 2011, Benedict XVI established in England the first Anglican Ordinariate with the name of Our Lady of Walsingham. Archbishop Vincent Nichols of Westminster said, "This is a unique moment, and the Catholic community in England and Wales is privileged to be playing its part in this historic development in the life of the universal Church." [3]

That same day, three former Anglican bishops, John Broadhurst, Andrew Burnham and Keith Newton, who

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had resigned their position as bishops of the Church of England and had been received in the Catholic Church on New Year's Day, were ordained Catholic priests by Archbishop Nichols. These priests became the first faithful of the ordinariate, and Father Keith Newton was appointed as the head of the ordinariate.

At the start of Lent, groups of faithful and approximately 50 Anglican clergy will enroll as candidates for the ordinariate and be received into the Catholic Church in Easter. The clergy will be ordained priests on Pentecost. This first ordinariate was very fittingly placed under the spiritual patronage of Blessed John Henry Newman, and named for Our Lady of Walsingham, one of great Marian Pilgrimage sites of the Middle Ages.

Ecumenism is a difficult task, but one which is inescapably tied with the very essence and mission of Christian life. The Holy Spirit, who guides the Church, has moved men and women throughout the ages to pray and work for the unity of all Christians. In the words of Vatican II, the "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."^[4] As the Church continues its tortuous path in history, it embraces this call to holiness and unity.

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NOTES:

[1] <http://vultus.stblogs.org/2008/01/ut-omnes-unum-sint.html>

[2] <http://vultus.stblogs.org/2008/01/ut-omnes-unum-sint.html>

[3] www.ncregister.com/daily-news/anglican-ordinariate-arrives

[4]

www.vatican.va/archive/hist_councils/ii_vatican_council/documents/vat-ii_decree_19641121_unitatis-redintegratio_en.html
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