

THEOLOGY STUDENT ESSAY CONTEST: PRAY WITHOUT CEASING

The Eschatological Mystery of Pentecost and Praying in the Spirit of Jesus

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In June of 2007, the Roman Catholic Church clarified what she means by saying “the Church of Christ subsists in the Catholic Church.” The statement reminds Christians that—according to Catholic teaching—since Protestant communities lack apostolic succession in Holy Orders, they cannot properly be called ‘Churches.’ The negative reaction of many Christians to this statement is certainly understandable. For those concerned with ecumenism—Protestant and Catholic alike—these words simply hurt. Especially for Protestants, who have increasingly seen ways in which they are in real communion with Catholics, these words sting. To have a fellow member of the Body of Christ claim that your community essentially lacks something is painful. Yet all this brings us to an unavoidable question: Should a wounded body not feel pain?

Although the Vatican’s words hurt, they are not in fact hurtful to ecumenism. Like nerves alert the body, these words expose the real wound created by Christian division. Wounds cannot be glossed over if they are to be healed. True healing is based in truth. The Vatican’s words challenge us and call us to task. Jesus desired and prayed that his followers be one. Yet we are divided and no one ecclesial community is free from blame. Important doctrinal divisions involving matters such as apostolic succession, sacraments, authority, tradition, and even the nature of Christian unity seem insurmountable. In fact, they are insurmountable by our own efforts. As the biblical figures and our forbears of old wept for the People of God and sought the face of the Lord in prayer and fasting, we too need to beseech the Lord anew. Painful—yet necessary—experiences of Christ’s divided body rend our hearts so that we are finally brought to our knees to cry out to God, who alone can save us. The 100<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the “Week of Prayer for Christian Unity” reminds us that we cannot achieve unity on our own, but need prayer. Only God can transform the evil of wounds into glorious tokens as he did in Christ’s Resurrection. We beg him to so transform our divisions somehow. We beg for a fresh coming of the Holy Spirit as at Pentecost. By praying without ceasing in Jesus’ name, we look with hope toward the heavenly kingdom God promises us as it begins to be realized even now.

Notwithstanding the real importance of our efforts in ecumenism, the fact of the matter is Christian unity is beyond our capacity. It is not just that it is a difficult task; it is inherently impossible for us. This is in contrast, for example, to establishing a worldwide political unity. The latter would no doubt be a difficult task, yet hypothetically it would be possible through our human resources. In fact, it seems our ancestors did at one time establish such a universal political unity. It ended with Babel. Christian unity is essentially different. It begins with Pentecost. It is initiated not by human effort, but by the presence and power of God. The discord of babbling is replaced by a unity of tongues, speaking in diverse languages yet proclaiming one Gospel—an archetypal diversity in unity. The perfect unity of Christians at Pentecost is a model for our imitation and a prefigurement of the Bride of Christ’s heavenly existence for all eternity. The late pope, John Paul II has noted that “in the Pentecost Event God has already manifested the Church in her eschatological reality” (*Ut Unum Sint* 14). Looking to the unity of Pentecost is neither a nostalgia for primitive Christianity nor a far-off dream for the future. As an eschatological reality, it exists *already*, although *not yet* in its perfected form. The same Holy Spirit who will bring to glory the one Bride of Christ already dwells in the hearts of Christians. He accompanies God’s Pilgrim People until that day when glorious pentecostal flames of fire will shine out from every Christian’s bosom.

The Holy Spirit, God himself, is the principle of Christian unity. He is the Spirit that animates and orders the diverse members of Christ's Body. Christian unity springs from a Divine Source and is ordered to a supernatural end. It is grounded in and mirrors the unity of the Triune God himself and is oriented toward participatory communion with the Blessed Trinity. The consequences are eternal. A full and rightly ordered communion of love with other believers prepares and shapes one for perfect communion with the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit forever. From the beginning to the end, the Holy Spirit remains the Divine Gift of Love which enables mere humans to commune with God and to be united to others with a love springing from the life of the Trinity. From the morning of Pentecost to the evening of the Eschaton, the impulse of love, which *is* the Holy Spirit, remains the bond of unity. Hence the importance of prayer in ecumenism is not limited solely to supplication. Through prayer we already commune with that Bond of Charity which must be the source of the unity we are trying to realize, a unity that mirrors the sublime unity of God—Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.

The more we pray without ceasing, the more we are shaped to be the sort of people who are capable of being in such a profound communion with others—not proud, rude, insistent on our own way, or resentful, but patient, kind, and bearing all things in faith, hope, and love (1 Cor 13:4-7). Through prayer and self-appraisal, we find ways in which we personally could be more faithful to God's plan for his People. The more we converse with God in prayer, the more we will be disposed to acting in response to the quiet and gentle inspirations of the Holy Spirit. We know God desires Christian unity, yet we do not know how God wills to bring it about nor precisely what all the details would look like. If Christian unity is to be reestablished, it will demand that at every step Christians respond to the Spirit's blowing in another 'Pentecost.' *Another 'Pentecost'* is really nothing other than a decisive re-enlivening of the eschatological mystery of the original. It would build upon, renew, and advance what the Holy Spirit has already wrought, with new graces for new circumstances. God's initiative may not be as dramatic as at the first Pentecost; it may subtly extend over decades. However, the same beckoning of and docile readiness for the Spirit's movement is required. "Praying without ceasing" entails 'listening without ceasing.' From Christian leaders to the average Christian in the pew, we each must individually listen to what God wants next. This may entail taking an interest in your neighbor's Faith tradition, visiting a friend's Sunday service, joining an interdenominational Bible study, serving the poor together, fasting for unity, defending the defenseless together, clarifying your Faith to another, or representing your tradition in a doctrinal dialogue. Only through listening without ceasing in prayer can we discern what to do next and how to order our steps in cooperating with God's action.

As an eschatological reality, the perfection of Christian communion can even now be embraced as 'through a mirror darkly.' With the indwelling Holy Spirit, all Christians share the divine gifts of faith, hope, and charity. We already share in common the most important thing: the seed of Eternal Life. The theological virtues are already a participation in God's own life and so anticipate the life which the Blessed enjoy in Heaven. Faith gives us a partial glimpse of the eschatological vision of the face of God and his fulfilled Kingdom. Hope gives us a slight taste of the eschatological satisfaction of all desire and the restoration of relationships. And charity gives us a small encounter with the eschatological union with God and all the saints. Prayer, as a distilled exercise of the theological virtues, reinvigorates our efforts to continue as co-laborers with God in realizing the eschatological reality of perfect Christian communion.

This is no flight from reality, but a vision of the reordering of all things to God which will be accomplished on the Last Day, when Jesus Christ reigns gloriously as Lord and all will bend the knee. Christians throughout every land and generation have all prayed in the same name of our Lord Jesus Christ. We have all asked the Lord of Love to overcome our stubborn resistance to his word and to hold sway over our hearts. Without a doubt, he will one day accomplish that perfect unity for which he himself has prayed: that they might be one even as the Father and Son are one (Jn 17:11). But even now his name contains his presence and power, so that wherever his name is invoked with faith, hope, and charity his reign expands. Jesus promised to draw all to himself (Jn 12:32). By praying in the name of the Lord Jesus Christ without ceasing, we all allow ourselves to be drawn to him and hence to one another.

### Prayer for Christian Unity

O Sublime Unity! Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, one God. Please send the Spirit of Unity upon us so that we may share in and reflect your own Triune life of love. We pray with Jesus: may we be one as the Father and Son are one (Jn 17:11).

We are divided and wounded, personally and collectively. We cannot heal ourselves, Father. Jesus must again show us his victorious wounds and breathe his Holy Spirit fresh upon us that we may be commissioned anew (Jn 20:20-22). Please bring us to that perfect unity founded on the three-fold office of Christ: a communion of sacrament, teaching, and governance according to Christ the Priest, Prophet, and King.

Gracious Father, we ask for another ‘Pentecost.’ As then, so now, we pray in one Spirit with the docile handmaid of the Lord. She directs us—her children—homeward to the Celestial Upper Room as she bids us: “Do whatever he asks of you” (Jn 2:5). We listen attentively and cry out: Come Holy Spirit! We await your coming. We are wounded and no one else can heal us. Arouse us with the heavenly fragrance of your love.

Triune God, our hearts are ready. Make them worthy abodes of your indwelling. Prepare us for that Final Day when we will adore your unveiled Face and praise you together with diverse tongues of fire. Until then, we hasten that perfect union and enjoy its foretaste as we pray together in the sweet name of our Lord Jesus Christ. Amen.

## Commentary on the Prayer

I am often struck by how profound is the unity to which we are called as followers of Jesus Christ. We are to be one as the Son is one with the Father. The Catholic Catechism notes that “the highest exemplar and source” of Christian unity is the Blessed Trinity (813). What a sublime reality we are to image! Yet that this exemplar is also the source of our unity gives me great hope. The God who created out of nothing can certainly make us one. My prayer hence begins by lifting our eyes to God in his mysterious unity. Any notions of a superficial or pseudo-unity of Christians are excluded when compared to this exemplar. Furthermore, the unity of the Trinity shows that the rich life of diversity has its place within unity. The one God is three *distinct* persons. We glorify the Trinity through giving ourselves to one another through our diverse personalities, talents, and charisms. This ideal of Christian unity is so tied up with the ideal of charity that striving for unity is neither optional nor part-time. Our particular actions in ecumenism will necessarily be limited; however, our striving to grow in charity cannot be. Doing acts of love even in one’s own household is a way of making progress toward the exemplar of unity toward which ecumenism strives. Moreover, one’s character so formed will make a difference in one’s explicit ecumenical work. Vatican II, in its Decree on Ecumenism, has accordingly spoken of the need for “interior conversion” and has called this important dimension of holiness, “spiritual ecumenism” (7-8).

The communion of love required to image the Trinity is so intimate and altruistic that we are not up to the task. We must pray to the source of unity. In my prayer, I acknowledge the barrier of our own sinfulness and self-centeredness. Not only is Christ’s Body divided and wounded, but we each are individually. We are divided within so that we do not always will the one thing necessary. Furthermore our past sins and those of others have left us wounded so that we are incapable of loving as we should and afraid to make ourselves vulnerable. We need to confess our sins and beg for healing, individually and collectively. Within Catholicism, every Friday is prescribed as a day of penance (Canon Law 1250). In my own practice, I sometimes direct this day toward the intention of Christian unity. Meditating on the glorious wounds of the Resurrected Christ gives me great hope. The victorious wounds show the radical transformation God can accomplish through Christ and the breath of his Spirit. And it is Christ’s own mission that marks the disciples as they are sent out. Christ’s Messianic office as priest, prophet, and king is imparted to the community of his disciples. Accordingly, Vatican II, in its Constitution on the Church, insists that true unity depends on communion in this threefold office as expressed in sacrament, creed, and governance (*Lumen Gentium* 14, cf 10-13 for threefold office). This degree of unity seems like a tall order; and it is on our own. With God, however, nothing is impossible. Christ’s wounds bear witness. His Spirit gives hope.

A renewal of the graces of Pentecost must be the way forward. We must pray for the coming of the Holy Spirit. In my personal prayer for Christian unity, I often turn to Mary to ask for her intercession. I pray with her as did the first disciples in the Upper Room (Acts 1:14). It is significant that she was present both at the birth of Christ and the birth of the Church—his human and mystical body. Catholicism has seen her as the Mother of all believers (LG 53, cf Rev 12:17). It is my hope that like any good mother, she can help bring her children together in a unified household. She goes before us as one who already possesses the heavenly reward for her response to the word of the Lord. As such, Vatican II and Catholic tradition view her as an

eschatological sign of the Church (LG 68). The Council ends the Constitution on the Church by hearkening back to Pentecost and asking again for the assistance of Mary's prayers, so that the People of God may be united for the glory of the Undivided Trinity (LG 69). I find this entirely fitting, for I believe that another 'Pentecost' has in fact begun with Vatican II. The full fruitfulness of the beginning however will depend on the discernment of what the Spirit has already wrought and docility to his continuous work—that we do whatever he asks of us. It is exciting to see what he will accomplish next.

By working for unity, both collectively and within our own hearts, we prepare for the Eschaton. By looking with hope toward this Day, we can in fact change the present. By fixing our gaze on the goal, we order our present journey accordingly. It reminds us of the profundity of the unity we strive for. It enlivens our faith in the power of Holy Spirit, the source of unity, to be effective even now. Often at Sunday Mass, I will call to mind the many Christians scattered throughout the world and among various traditions—personal friends and those I have yet to meet. I think of them all gathering in their respective churches to praise the Blessed Trinity. Sunday gives me a glimpse of the eschatological Sabbath Rest. On that Day at the Wedding Feast of the Lamb, we will be perfectly one. Yet even now at Mass, I offer my brothers and sisters' prayers with my own in the one offering of Christ. With the name of Jesus also on their lips, may they let my prayers mingle with theirs too. With one prayer, then, guiding our steps without ceasing, we will journey ever more closely together until we attain love's perfect fulfillment in Heaven.