

2012 NATIONAL WORKSHOP ON CHRISTIAN UNITY

Evening Prayer

First United Methodist Church

Oklahoma City, Oklahoma

April 16, 2012

My dear brothers and sisters in Christ, it is a joy to gather in prayer on this evening radiant in the splendor of our shared faith in Christ's Easter victory! I am delighted to add my words of welcome to those already spoken. We are honored to have this opportunity to host the 2012 National Workshop on Christian Unity in Oklahoma City; to welcome you to our community and share with you our warm Oklahoma hospitality.

Fifty years ago when Pope John XXIII delivered his opening address to those assembled at the beginning of the Second Vatican Council, he counted among its principal goals a commitment to work for greater unity: unity within the Catholic Church, unity among all Christians, greater unity and understanding with non-Christian religions and indeed with all men and women of goodwill. He said, "Such is the aim of the Second Vatican Ecumenical Council which prepares, as it were, and consolidates the path toward that unity of mankind where truth reigns, charity is the law and whose extent is eternity." (*Gaudet Mater Ecclesia*) Good Pope John and the Council which he convened recognized and taught that the Church is the instrument established by Christ through his Paschal Mystery to restore the unity of the human race, fractured by sin and division.

This vision, articulated by Blessed John XXIII, and incorporated into the teaching of that great ecumenical council, provides the backdrop for this workshop as we consider the influence of Vatican II which after 50 years ago continues to inspire our ecumenical endeavors to this day. It is a vision which affirms that the quest for unity among Christians is not a peripheral concern, but at the heart of what it means to adhere to the Gospel and to the Church of Christ.

A good many years ago a young and newly ordained priest approached Mother Teresa of Calcutta to seek a word of counsel from her. She looked at him with deep affection and said simply, "Stay out of God's way." That is good counsel for all of us, especially in our ecumenical labors.

Unity is God's gift. "Christ bestowed unity on his Church from the beginning." (*Decree on Ecumenism*, 4) It is one of the Church's distinguishing characteristics as we will shortly profess in the Nicene Creed. The Church is one, holy, catholic and apostolic. The Church is one because of her source. As Vatican II's *Decree on Ecumenism* declared: "the highest exemplar and source of this mystery is the unity, in the Trinity of Persons, of one God, the Father and the Son in the Holy Spirit." (UR, 2) The Church is one, moreover, because of her founder, "the Word made flesh, the prince of peace," who, "reconciled all men to God by the cross, 'restoring the unity of all in 'one body.'" (GS, 78) The Church is one, the Decree continues, because of her soul: "It is the Holy Spirit, dwelling in those who believe and pervading and ruling over the entire Church, who brings about that wonderful communion of the faithful and joins them together so intimately in Christ that he is the principal of the Church's unity." (UR, 2) One of the second century Church Fathers, St. Clement of Alexandria exclaimed: "What an

astonishing mystery! There is one Father of the universe, one Logos of the universe, and also one Holy Spirit, everywhere one and the same; and there is also one virgin become mother, and I should like to call her "Church." (cited in *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, 813)

"Christ bestowed unity on his Church from the beginning." (UR, 4) But we are painfully aware of the divisions which have hampered us from fully receiving and cultivating this gift. In every generation we have to pray and work assiduously to maintain, reinforce, and perfect the unity that Christ wills for His Church. That is why Christ prayed to his Father at the Hour of his Passion, and does not cease praying for the unity of his disciples, for the unity of the Church: "That they may all be one. As you, Father, are in me and I am in you, may they also be one in us, so the world may know that you have sent me." (Jn. 17:21) The desire stirring in our hearts tonight to recover and restore this lost unity among Christians is itself a gift of Christ and a call of the Holy Spirit.

The *Decree on Ecumenism* of Vatican II laid out a roadmap to help the Church respond to this divine summons and to cooperate with the grace urging us toward deeper unity in truth and charity. What does that roadmap laid out fifty years ago look like? It might be helpful to dust it off and see how we have done with it. (cf. *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, 821)

First, it reminds us that the Church herself is called to ongoing renewal. The Church herself is summoned to greater fidelity to her vocation as the bride of Christ and the sign and sacrament of unity for all humankind. We have to be faithful to our call to communion and to mission. Our

divisions hinder us and make us a less than compelling witness before the world which we are sent to evangelize and to serve.

Second, we are each called to conversion of heart. We are each called to live holy lives, to strive to become the saints that God desires us to be in virtue of our Baptism into Christ. It is our unfaithfulness as members of Christ's body that causes and hardens the divisions among us that are such a stumbling block to the world which so desperately needs what the Gospel of Jesus Christ alone can offer. We are called daily to repentance and conversion.

Third, the Council urges us to seek and to embrace opportunities for common prayer. "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." (UR, 9) It merits the name *spiritual ecumenism*.

Fourth, the *Decree on Ecumenism* invites us to a greater fraternal sharing and knowledge of each other. It's harder to mistrust and vilify those whom we have come to know and understand and with whom we have shared our hopes and struggles. We discover that what we share in common as brothers and sisters in Christ is greater than what may divide us.

Fifth, the document urges ecumenical formation for all of the faithful and the Church's ministers.

Sixth, dialogue among theologians and meetings among Christians of different churches is an important and necessary path to greater mutual respect, understanding and clarity regarding our

agreements and differences as dialogue partners. Dialogue is hard work. It demands an unwavering commitment to truth, to honesty and integrity as we look beneath the surface of commonly held assumptions about the faith and practice of our dialogue partners.

Finally, we are invited to join in common initiatives in service to our brothers and sisters: what we call the corporal and spiritual works of mercy (i.e., feeding the hungry, sheltering the homeless), the works of justice and advocacy on behalf of the most vulnerable in our midst. Here in Oklahoma City we experienced this in a powerful way when the whole nation joined to support us after the tragedy of the bombing of the Murrah Federal Building which occurred across the street nearly 18 years ago. When we roll up our sleeves together to serve those in need we don't serve others because they are Christians, but because we are Christians. Our faith requires it.

It is perhaps reassuring that so much of this "roadmap" seems quite familiar to us. It is the path we have been walking together for many years.

It is good to recognize how far we have come along the way. But we must honestly and humbly acknowledge that we have a long way to go. Again, the *Decree on Ecumenism*, even though promulgated during those heady and hope-filled days of Vatican II, reminded us that the task is too great for us. It said, "this holy objective" the reconciliation of all Christians in the unity of the one and only Church of Christ "transcends human powers and gifts." (UR, 24) But it does not transcend what the prayer of Christ, the love of the Father and the power of the Holy Spirit

can work in us and through us; even in spite of us. That is why it might be good for us to recall frequently Mother Teresa's wise counsel to the young zealous priest, "Stay out of God's way."