

St Paul And Ecumenism: A Guide To Christian Unity

Cletus Tanimu Gotan
University of Jos

Introduction

The New Testament records several instances in which our Lord Jesus Christ prayed either alone or in the company of his disciples. It does not always tell us what Jesus prayed for. But one of the rare occasions when we are told what Jesus prayed for, we learn that he prayed for unity among his followers in the following words, among others:

May they all be one, Father, may they all be one in us, as you are in me and I am in you so that the world may believe it was you who sent me. I have given them the glory that you gave to me, that they may be one as we are one. With me in them and you in me, may they be so completely one that the world will realize that it was you who sent me and that I have loved them as much as you loved me. (John 17:21 – 23).

That was the prayer of Jesus. But no sooner did he leave than his disciples started fighting one another. When Jesus uttered the words “may they all be one”, they by no means represented a vision or a dream. Jesus said these words on the eve of his death. This was not the time for triumphal utopias. The Galilean spring, when the enthusiastic crowds overwhelmed him, was over. They no longer cried “Hosanna!” but “Crucify him!”. Jesus was well aware of this, and predicted also that his disciples would not be one, and that they would be dispersed. What else could he do in this situation than to leave the future of his work in the hands of his Father? Thus, the words “may they all be one” are a prayer, a prayer in a humanly perceived hopeless situation (Kasper, 2003).

Just a few years after his prayer, divisions had already set in: first, between Jews and Greeks, and latter between Greeks and Latins. Then in the 16th Century AD, the climax of divisions was reached with the Protestant Reformation, when, first the Germans with Martin Luther, then, the English with Henry VIII, the Scots with John Knox and the Swiss with Ulrich Zwingli and John Calvin parted ways with Rome. In a very real sense, the demon of division was let loose, so that other groups protesting against the original Protestants were formed (Methodist, Baptists, Evangelicals, and the so called Reform Church). It would seem from these developments that the followers of Jesus were hell bent on frustrating his prayer. It was as if they were saying to him “Lord, you prayed for unity but we won’t let it happen”. Trust Nigerians to increase the complication of an already confused situation. Here in Nigeria, we have not only divided Christianity; we have literally fragmented it; and are still doing so. According to the *Encyclopedia of World Religions*, at the last count, somewhere around 1980, there were 960 groups claiming to be autonomous Christians in Nigeria .

However, in the midst of all the division and fragmentation, one fact remains eternally true, mere men cannot permanently frustrate God’s designs. After all is said and done, men are only men while God alone is God. It is impossible that God should propose and men dispose. Rather, what happens, and is bound to happen, is that “Man proposes while God disposes”.

The divisions among Christian peoples in our day have become an open prey to the enemies of Christ. They capitalize on dissensions among Christians to weaken the impact of Christ's teaching on human culture and have become one of the principal tools of the anti-Christian forces that are so active in this era.

What other occasion than the celebration of the Year of St Paul, which Bartholomew I (2008) recalls is perhaps "the first theologian of Church unity," a fundamental characteristic since its foundation, as expressed by Jesus Christ in the prayer pronounced shortly before his passion (John 17:20-23) is more apt to address the problem of ecumenism in the Church? It was precisely Paul, who was the first to develop the concept of Church unity, fighting more than any of the other apostles in order that it be realized. His zeal in spreading the message of Christ was strong, but just as strong was his "personal agony" at falling short of his goal: "Nothing else," the patriarch continued, "made Paul as sad as the lack of unity among Christians (Galatians 5:15). For Paul, the schism in the Church was a terrible and repugnant fact, because it meant dividing the Body of Christ," seeing that it was precisely the apostle of the Gentiles who reminds us how the "Church is the Body of our Lord Jesus Christ."

Some scholars opined that Paul's missionary work itself caused divisions in the church right from the start and that he was instrumental in the church's spread into areas where the prevailing pagan culture was very different from that of its origins in Jerusalem, and problems then arose. This is to say that Paul is an accomplice in the proclamation of the gospel to all the world, leaving the church vulnerable to divisions over points of doctrine, church governance, liturgical practice and way of life. In fact the Acts of the Apostles tells how Paul proclaimed the gospel across the Roman Empire, stirring up opposition from Jews, pagans and perhaps other Christians. He had to organize a famine relief collection from his Gentile churches to demonstrate his support for the largely Jewish church in Jerusalem. He intended to go to Spain but was hindered by his imprisonment in Rome. His motives for going to Spain are uncertain: Acts portrays it as a missionary initiative but there are suggestions that he might have been attempting to get away from opposition by Christians he had offended.

Paul's message is that Jesus, through his death, resurrection and ascension, has opened the way for all people - not just Jews - to be blessed by God. Influenced by him, people say that God has made known how great among the Gentiles are the riches of the mystery of Christ in us, the hope of glory. (Colossians 1:27). Christians have proclaimed this message for two thousand years and the church has spread across the world and followed Paul's example of developing Christian doctrine by formulating creeds, codifying practice, encouraging theological study and the preaching the faith. Tensions have arisen with different understandings about doctrines - questions of authority in the church and the doctrine of the Holy Spirit split the Church in Rome and the Orthodox Church; the Protestant Churches split from the Roman Catholic Church over justification by grace through faith and divided within themselves over issues like predestination; the Church in England split from Rome over the authority of the pope; Anabaptists refused to recognize infant baptism; Congregationalists refused the authority of bishops; the failure of the Church of England to provide bishops in America precipitated the separation of the Methodist Church, openness to the Holy Spirit's gifts led to various Pentecostal churches which themselves divided into various branches. The prosecution does not claim that Paul is responsible for these particular divisions, but his pushing of the gospel into new areas and new cultures, and his exploration of new theology, opened the way for them. He is implicated in both the spread of the church but also its divisions.

Strictly speaking, Paul did nothing more than proclaim the good news that is inherent in the Hebrew Bible, that God's intention is to bless the whole world, not just the people of Israel. He did nothing other than acting out of an insight into God's purpose from the beginning of creation to bless the world, that the promise to Abraham is fulfilled not by keeping the law but in Christ, the saviour of the world. Paul grasped the fact that the incarnation of Jesus Christ made possible the promise in Isaiah, 'Thus says the Lord God, who gathers the outcasts of Israel, I will gather others to them besides those already gathered.' (Isaiah 56:8). In other words, if I can dare to put it like this, the responsibility lies with God. Paul merely grasped the vision and gave his life to proclaiming it.

Those are far-reaching consequences of God's salvation which Paul picked up and interpreted in his day. If the church could hear them afresh today, some of the divisions might disappear. The people of Isaiah's time couldn't grasp the breadth of God's mercy for the whole world and, like so many small groups who feel threatened, focused in on themselves and missed yet again the implications of God's generosity to them as a nation. Paul's message is that in the incarnation - the birth of Jesus Christ, the Son of God, to a human mother - we see God's ultimate new beginning that fulfils rather all that has gone before. The law, which came centuries after the promise to Abraham and was needed to deal with human sin, had not saved the people because they failed to keep it whereas Jesus lived the life of a faithful Jew and fulfilled all the law and the prophets. Paul's defence is the insight, which he argued in the letter to the Galatians, that all the promises to Abraham find their fulfillment in Christ, and in him we are all children of God through faith.

Efforts to Restore Christian Unity

Christ's words, handed down by the Apostles leave no doubts as to his will, which is in conformity with the Father's plan: "I do not pray for these only, but also for those who believe in me through their word, that they may all be one; even as you, Father, are in me and I in you, that they also may be in us..." (Jn 17:20-21). The unity of the Father and the Son in the Holy Spirit is the supreme basis of the Church's unity. The perfection of that transcendent unity must be imitated, "that they may become perfectly one" (Jn 17:23). This divine unity is therefore the founding principle of the union of believers: "that they may all be one ... in us" (Jn 17:21).

In the Gospels and in the other New Testament writings, it is also clearly stated that the unity of the Church was achieved by the redeeming sacrifice of Christ. We read, for example, in John's Gospel that: "Jesus should die ... and not for the nation only, but to gather into one the children of God who are scattered abroad" (Jn 11:51-52). If their dispersion was the fruit of sin—this is the lesson that emerges from the Tower of Babel episode—the reunification of God's dispersed children was the work of Redemption. With his sacrifice Jesus created "one new man" and reconciled human beings with one another, breaking down the hostility that divided them (cf. Eph 2:14-16).

In order to resolve the problems facing the emerging Church, Paul participated in the first Synod of the Apostles in Jerusalem (Acts of the Apostles, 15). Although he knew his ideas were correct, St. Paul understood that "the more correct way was synodal - collegial - handling of Church affairs." This value is still relevant today, as Bartholomew recalled, denouncing the attempts "of small groups or individuals to impose their ideas," without respecting the criterion of "collegiality" as foreseen by the "Pauline paradigm" that is at the basis of the Church, because this does not exist "for itself, but for all creation." (Bartholomew I)

In accordance with Christ's word, St. Paul taught that the diversity of the body's members does not hinder their unity: "For just as the body is one and has many members, and all the members of the body, though many, are one body, so it is with Christ" (1 Cor 12:12). This unity in the Church derives first of all from Baptism and the Eucharist, through which the Holy Spirit is communicated and acts: "For by one Spirit we were all baptized into one body ... and all were made to drink of one Spirit (1 Cor 12:12, 13). "Because there is one bread, we who are many are one body, for we all partake of the one bread" (1 Cor 10:17).

St. Paul, Apostle and doctor of unity, described its dimension in the life of the Church: "There is one body and one Spirit, just as you were called to the one hope that belongs to your call, one Lord, one faith, one baptism, one God and Father of us all, who is above all and through all and in all" (Eph 4:4-6).

One body: the image expresses an organic whole, indissolubly united through a spiritual unity: one Spirit. This is a real unity, which Christians are called to live ever more deeply, fulfilling its demands and "with perfect humility, meekness and patience, bearing with one another lovingly" (Eph 4:2).

The Church's unity thus expresses a twofold aspect: it is a property whose indestructible foundations are the divine unity of the Trinity itself, but it also demands of believers the responsibility of accepting it and concretely putting it into practice in their life (cf. *Ut unum sint*, n. 6).

It is first of all a question of preserving the *una fides*, the profession of the one faith of which the Apostle Paul speaks. This faith involves common adherence to Christ and to the whole truth revealed by him to humanity, attested in Scripture and preserved in the Church's living Tradition. Precisely in order to maintain and foster unity in the faith, Jesus wanted to establish a specific authority in the Apostolic College, linking its Magisterium to himself: "He who hears you hears me" (Lk 10:16; cf. Mt 28:18-20).

As a function of the *koinonia* of believers, the authority of the Apostles and their successors is a service that is expressed sacramentally, doctrinally and pastorally as a function of a unity not only of doctrine but also of direction and governance. St. Paul confirms this: "And his gifts were that some should be apostles, some prophets, some evangelists, some pastors and teachers ... for building up the body of Christ, until we all attain to the unity of the faith and of the knowledge of the Son of God..." (Eph 4:11-13).

In this perspective the specific ministry assigned to Peter and his successors is easily understood. It was founded on Christ's very words, as they have been passed down in the Gospel tradition (cf. *Ut unum sint*, n. 96). It is a mystery of grace which the eternal Pastor of our souls has desired for his Church, so that, by growing and working in charity and truth, she might remain in every age visibly united with the glory of God the Father.

We ask him for the gift of an ever deeper understanding between the faithful and their pastors, and, as regards the Petrine ministry, we implore the necessary light in order to identify the best ways it can achieve a service of communion recognized by all (*Ut unum sint*, n. 96).

The Implication of the Ecumenical Movement

This effort of those who call themselves disciples of Christ to redouble their commitment to achieving the full unity of all Christians is not meant to amalgamate the Churches or make our communities conformist institutions in which everyone thinks the same thoughts, says the same words, does the same deeds and in the same ways. The effort seeks rather for areas of dialogue, joint action among the Christian groups in carrying out the great commission or mandate of the Lord to speak the Gospel to every creature (Mt 28:28) so as to embrace all peoples in his Church.

The Holy Father, Pope Benedict XVI, (2008) observed that the unity Christ desired does not, in fact, involve any external, stifling uniformity. He pointed out in his Encyclical that "legitimate diversity is in no way opposed to the Church's unity, but rather enhances her splendour and contributes greatly to the fulfilment of her mission" (ibid., n. 50). Many local or particular Churches preserve their own way of living the Christian commitment, in accordance with institutions of apostolic origin, very ancient traditions or practices established in various periods on the basis of experiences that have proved apt for the inculturation of the Gospel. Therefore variety is a good that should remain. The Church's unity will have nothing to suffer from it especially if Christians, aware of its divine origin, implore it constantly in their prayers.

However, unity needs also to be distinguished from uniformity. The Spirit dispenses his gifts in great variety and richness (cf. 1 Cor 12, 4 ff), and human beings, human cultures are so different that any imposed

uniformity will not only not satisfy human hearts but will diminish the richness and the very catholicity of the Church. It is only when the Church will have entered in all cultures and when she will have made her own the richness of all peoples and nations that she will have reached her full catholicity. The Spirit will guide us in to the whole truth (John 16, 12) through encounter with new cultures, new situations, new challenges, new experiences and new needs, as well as through ecumenical encounter and dialogue. In this way the Spirit maintains the once and for all tradition perennially young and fresh. It is the Spirit of permanent renewal of the truth revealed once and for all time.

III. This concept of pluriformity within unity has consequences for our ecumenical vision. Firstly, it has consequences on our understanding of unity in faith. To confess the same faith does not necessarily mean to confess the same credal formula. One of the most significant progresses of the ecumenical dialogue in the last decades was made with the old Oriental churches, which separated as far back as the 5th century because they could not accept the dogma of the 4th Ecumenical Council of Chalcedon (451), namely, Jesus Christ being two natures in one person (hypostasis). With Saint Cyril of Alexandria they confess the one nature (one physis) of the Logos made flesh. Hence, through the centuries they were known as monophysists. It has only been in recent times that we have discovered that the crucial aspect is not a question of confessing a different faith, but the use of a different philosophical terminology in order to express the faith which in substance is the same as ours. They have a different understanding of the terms nature and person (hypostasis). So we did not impose our formulas on them, and in formal agreements between the Pope and the respective Patriarchs, we acknowledged our unity in faith, a unity in a pluriformity of expressions.

A similar decision was made in the Joint Declaration on Justification between the Catholic Church and the Lutheran World Federation, signed officially in 1999 in Augsburg. Here too only a so-called differentiated consensus was reached, that is a consensus in fundamental questions. In essence it was stated that while unresolved problems remain at issue, no clear dividing difference any longer exists with regard to the question of justification. Hence, prior existing divisive contradictions were transformed and reconciled in complementary assertions, expressions, concerns and approaches.

Nor is uniformity required in the sacramental dimension of the Church either. It is well known that sacramental life can be expressed through different rites, and that in East and West these rites are indeed quite different. But the difference can go even deeper. The Assyrian Church, which separated in the 4th century after the third Ecumenical Council of Ephesus (381) and which for a long time was accused of being Nestorian, uses as anaphora (eucharistic prayer), the anaphora of Adai and Mari, without the words of institution in a narrative form. It is probably the oldest anaphora we know, going back to the second century and composed in the Aramaic language, the language of Jesus himself. This Church, which possesses an undoubtedly valid episcopate, confesses the same eucharistic faith we confess. It is unimaginable and unthinkable that she has celebrated throughout the centuries a Eucharist that is invalid. Thus two years ago the validity of this anaphora was officially acknowledged by the Catholic Church.

More recently, in our own time, the efforts to restore unity have assumed the magnitude of a global movement, with the name of "Ecumenism". Christian leaders at Vatican II, for instance, have declared the disunity among Christians a "scandal", a veritable stumbling block in the way of proclaiming "the Good News to all creation" (Mark 16:15), and making "disciples of all nations" (Matthew 28:19). They have, therefore, set themselves the task of healing the wound of division and disunity.

The teaching of the Lord and the exposition of the Apostles should provide us with incentive to work for and intensify this unity in the faith of our Lord Jesus Christ and our common possession of the word of God - as contained in the Old and New Testament of the Holy Bible. Christians must do all within their power

to improve relations between fellow Christians. Books and pamphlets published in the by-gone days of animosity and belligerence should find no place in our bookstores and bookstalls.

How Do We Go About It?

There cannot be Church unity as long as there remain anathemas of one Church against another, be it that one church says that the other sins by defect because she denies articles of faith founded in Scripture and tradition or that she sins by excess, because she avows credal formulas which are additional to the once for all revelation.

Church unity is impossible with contradictions, and churches cannot or should not enter into conflicting agreements with different partners. Comprehensiveness is a good thing, but it should not be exaggerated, and pluralism should not become a new beatitude added to the Sermon on the Mount. The identity and inner coherence of the Church must be clear ad intra and ad extra. “Every kingdom that is divided against itself will fall apart” and “cannot last” (Mt 12,25).

To achieve this, a change of heart which will involve a number of things is necessary:

1. Catholics and Protestants must be prepared to accept one another as being fully and authentically Christian, who happen to be different not necessarily false or counterfeit, heretic or schismatic
2. Catholics and Protestants must learn to respect each other's right to be different. We should not demand that people first convert to our own way of thinking, believing and worshipping before we can talk to them or relate to them on a serious level. I recall here the story several years ago of a Greek choir director who refused to use English in the Divine Liturgy. When it was pointed out to him that the Church's tradition was to use the language of the people, and that an entirely Greek liturgy would likely be alienating and spiritually unfulfilling for converts as well as cradle Orthodox who were not fluent in Greek. He replied, “If they want an English liturgy, they can go to the Episcopal Church.”
3. Love is the only basis that is sufficient to found Christian unity upon. If we seek to base it on anything else, like doctrine, laws, worship, tradition, it will not succeed.
4. Much as it is attractive, especially to us Catholics, that all Christians should be re-united in one monolithic Church, with one visible head (the Pope), one priesthood (our own), one liturgy (the mass), one doctrine (our dogma), one law (canon law), seven sacraments (our own), such unity is not realistic or likely to come at the present time or in the near future. One can hardly expect people to simply shed centuries of their tradition and warmly embrace one's tradition. I even doubt if that is desirable.

It seems more realistic, right now, to look for and work for a unity in diversity, i.e., a “mosaic” Church, so to say, instead of a monolithic one – a Church in which there would be differences of liturgy, modes of administration, legal systems, but still with “*one Lord, One faith, One baptism, and One God who is Father of all, through all within all*” [Ephesians 4:50].