

**Sermon Given by Fr. Damian MacPherson
Ecumenical Prayer Service at the Cathedral of St. Peter-in-Chains
on January 21, 2009
During the Week of Prayer for Christian Unity**

The combined themes from Ezekiel (37:15-19,22-24a), St. Paul's (Romans 8:18-25) appeal for 'a hope-filled patience', and John's (17:8-11) call, in Jesus' prayer, for oneness are fitting enough reminders that we Christians, called to love one another, are a divided community of believers who need healing and restored unity. It was in 1917 at the Edinburg Conference that Protestants were first forced to address the consequences of a divided Christianity, especially as it related to their mission outreach. Protestants, therefore, have been at the work of Christian Unity much longer than Roman Catholics. In 1963 with the Second Vatican Council, the Roman Catholic Church entered the ecumenical mainstream and became a welcome presence as it joined forces with Protestants, Anglicans and Orthodox in pursuit of this most sought after treasure, the visible unity of all Christians.

From the outset of his pontificate, Pope Benedict clearly stated that he would "work without sparing energy for the full and visible unity of the Church," making ecumenism of primary importance in his pontificate. I would say that the present pontiff finds strength of conviction from the legacy of his immediate predecessor, Pope John Paul II, who in a land mark document, *Ut Unum Sint*, declared that the ecumenical effort on the part of the Roman Catholic Church is irreversible (#3). From this same text, Roman Catholics have been put on notice that, "It is absolutely clear that ecumenism, the movement promoting Christian unity, is not some sort of 'appendage' which is added to the Church's traditional activity. Rather ecumenism is an organic part of her life and

work, and consequently must pervade all that she is and does (*Ut Unum Sint* #20). From the highest voices which speak on behalf of the Roman Catholic Church, we have been reminded that being ecumenical is no longer a choice one arbitrarily makes but now is a responsibility one must necessarily assume. So central is the ecumenical agenda to the life of the Church that Roman Catholics have been reminded, and Protestants, Anglicans and Orthodox should know, that one can no longer be Roman Catholic and not be ecumenical. Equal commitment is spoken of by the World Council of Churches whose single goal is the full and visible restoration of the unity of Christianity.

Hopeful and helpful in pursuit of this common goal is the shared and agreed upon understanding that a unity of faith allows for the retention of our spiritual identities. Today, our common ecumenical efforts are directed toward the discovery of a “reconciled diversity,” rooted and grounded in truth. It must be a diversity, which suitably recognizes the rich and vibrant heritage to which each of us belong. Also important in this common pursuit of unity is acceptance of the fact that the closer Protestants, Anglican, Orthodox and Catholics grow toward Jesus Christ, the closer they grow to one another. The closer we grow together in Jesus Christ, the closer we grow to that unity for which Jesus himself prayed in John 21:17, “that they all may be one as you Father are in me that they also may be one in us so that the world may believe that it was you who sent me”.

Only an unrepentant heart would reject the fact that mutual conversion is an indispensable part of the lofty and irreversible goals, which we commonly pursue in this quest for unity. Conversion is essential for Christian life and therefore together we must confess with our lips and believe in our hearts that “there can be no ecumenism worthy of

the name without a change of heart. The ecumenical movement in some respects is first and foremost a movement of conversion to new life. It requires a purification of memories, a new way of thinking” (*Ut unum sint* #15 -*That all may be one*). Both the World Council of Churches and the Vatican firmly embrace this call of the heart. To take seriously that departing prayer of Jesus to the Father (Jn. 17-21) ought to leave each of us with an unfinished and unsatisfied sense of ourselves. Our common failure to find the way and means to establish the solidarity brought about by a united Christendom remains a shared scandal to the entire world and has served to create a Church which otherwise would manifest itself with strength in a spirit of unity. It has been said that, “We [Christians] pay a high price for the walls of division, which separate and divide us. [division] openly contradicts the will of Christ, provides a stumbling block to the world, and inflicts damage on the most holy cause of promoting the Good News to every creature” (*Ut unum sint* #6).

At the same time, we must acknowledge that there has been a remarkable amount of success and achievement derived from our common ecumenical efforts, especially since the Second Vatican Council. I like the image offered by the late Cardinal Carter, a former Archbishop of Toronto. When describing the ecumenical journey, he likened it to rowing a boat into the wind; you only know how much progress you have made until you look back and see how far you have come, he noted. One thing that is certain among us is that when we look back, we do not want to go back. We should have that anxious spirit of children who repeatedly ask, “are we there yet?” Although we are not there yet, we long to hear what the Gentiles said of the early Christians in Antioch, “see those Christians, see how they love one another”. In the wake of our progress, I think you will agree that

among the greatest achievements of the modern ecumenical movement is the new civility that has been brought back and keeps us together. There has been a common cleansing of the mind and renewal of the spirit, which has allowed us to lay aside suspicions, attitudes of disdain, uncharitable judgements against one another and the likes of such.

We do well to remember that the concerns of ecumenism must not be left in the hands of a few, but rightly belongs to all the baptized. That is why tonight I want to say that we, each one of us, is called to be a “spiritual ecumenist” who makes our most important contribution by way of prayer, personally, communally and ecumenically. “When brothers and sisters who are not in perfect communion with one another come together to pray, the Second Vatican Council defines their prayer as ‘the soul of the whole ecumenical movement’” (Decree on Ecumenism).

This Week of Prayer for Christian Unity and our gathering tonight makes real what the World Council of Churches and the Vatican hope for and expect as they embrace the blessed and irreversible task for a united Christendom. In God’s name, may the work of our hands and the faith of our hearts see to its completion.