

Ecumenical Conference “Parables of Communion” – 22.10.2016

*Each one of us has been given his or her own share of grace, given as Christ allotted it (...) so that all the saints together make a unity in the work of service, building up the body of Christ.*

These past days have been a real blessing for those of us who have been part of the *One In Christ* Conference.

What we have lived here has been of itself an eloquent *parable of communion*.

We are invited to en-flesh this parable over and beyond these days of grace, as we go wherever the Lord sends us, to do whatever He tells us, in His service and that of our brothers and sisters.

Our gathering has brought home to each one of us that we have been gifted: blessed by others and called to be for others a source of blessing.

Paul's words to the Ephesians heard in this final Eucharist remind us that it befalls each one of us to continue to contribute to the Church's growth in unity.

The experience of these past days is surely an encouragement for all of us to move beyond the confines we are inclined to set upon ourselves by our self-absorption at both a community level and a personal level.

Pope Francis continually reminds us that a concrete collaboration between our Churches and respective communities is necessary for a more effective prophetic witness. He has stressed how communion and encounter between different charisms and vocations within the one family of God open up a path of hope for our respective Churches and for the world in which we live.

In the logic of Christ's own prayer *that all may be one so that the world may come to believe*, it is only when we testify to the truth of the gospel together that our testimony will ever be esteemed credible.

The recent meeting between the Bishop of Rome and the Archbishop of Canterbury, the sending out of Anglican and Roman Catholic bishops in pairs as mission teams; the many gestures which have been posed by Patriarch Bartholomew and Pope Francis together; the frequent exchanges between Christians of the Churches issued from the Reformation and Pope Francis... all point to one thing: the importance of joint witness.

The painful reality of our divided world which has seen Christian blood being shed in many areas of conflict leads us to recognise that a privileged ecumenism of our own day and age is, what has been called, *the ecumenism of blood*.

The mingling of blood of Christian prophets of the different Churches cannot but challenge us to see ourselves as non-Christians perceive us: as one in Christ.

I am reminded of that little phrase found in Paul's Letter to the Galatians which is echoed in the title of the Periodical whose publication we celebrate and give thanks for: *You are all one in Christ!*

The ecumenism we are called to is rooted in that little phrase. It must amount to more than simply agreeing to live side by side with a certain degree of comfort. It would have us offer each other more than just a fair level of disinterested tolerance of each other's difference. We are called to more than that surely. To use a phrase Teresa of Avila uses in her poetry: we are called to be *'oned' in Christ*.

From the very outset of today's first reading the apostle is adamant that the call addressed to us is to recognise and rejoice in each other's specific gifts.

We are certainly not meant to see and live our differences as some sort of threat, which gives reason to a spirit of competitiveness, not to say a spirit of rivalry.

Called to recognise and rejoice in each other's gifts, we are called to live in mutual respect with a profound admiration for each other's differences.

Looking at each other from our different denominational backgrounds, if only we could echo something along the lines of St Bernard of Clairvaux's *Apologia to William of Saint Thierry*. Speaking in that text of the various Religious Orders in the Church, the great Cistercian teacher declared something which I believe to be equally applicable to those who strive to live in authentic ecumenical relationships.

Bernard wrote: *I admire them all. I belong to one of them by observance, but to all of them by charity. We all need one another: the spiritual good which I do not own and possess, I receive from others ... In this exile, the Church is still on pilgrimage and is, in a certain sense, plural: she is a single plurality and a plural unity. All our diversities, which make manifest the richness of God's gifts, will continue to exist in the one house of the Father, which has many rooms. Now there is division of graces; then there will be distinctions of glory. Unity, both here and there, consists in one and the same charity.*

Bernard's mention of *exile* in that text sends us back to a theme we have evoked more than once these past days: the call to journey together, the invitation to make our pilgrim way to the Father's house, so that, gathered together there, we may live as united members of one family, forming one body one spirit in Christ.

If our experience of these past days has been an authentic pilgrimage, it will have stretched our legs for the journey that still lies ahead.

The whole purpose of our Conference was to commemorate the fiftieth volume of the periodical *One In Christ*. Our coming together was not only about the past, however. We wanted to celebrate the past with gratitude, so as to live the present with passion, while looking forward to the future with hope.

The Risen Lord has accompanied us along the road we have walked, all these past years and especially these past few days. He has opened up the Scriptures for us. He has yet to lead us to that place and time where we share the one bread and drink at the one cup. But, is it sufficient to say that it is the Lord's responsibility to lead us to share one Eucharist? Is the onus not on us to create a space for Jesus, as the Emmaus pilgrims did when they invited the Lord to join them at the table where He revealed Himself in the bread broken and shared?

If we are true to Christ, we cannot but feel dissatisfied that we have not yet come to the point where we share communion at one Eucharistic table.

We must not lose sight of the goal: to share one bread and drink at one cup, in full communion.

We must work together to hasten the day when all Christians gather around the altar of the Lord.

Clearly we are all beckoned to go out of ourselves; we are invited to move beyond the present point, where our Churches are seen to be stifled in their witness. We must recognise that what stifles us is rooted in our vanity and pride, our readiness to take offence and our slowness to

let go of past hurts. We must let go of our mutual recriminations and excommunications. The reasons for our holding ourselves separate, the arguments we present to justify our dissensions, may seem to us to be of consequential magnitude, but I suspect that in the eyes of our great God they appear as but petty squabbles which we have allowed to hold us hostage for far too long.

If only we were all to adopt that attitude which Benedict reminds us in the Rule is so essential to the experience of genuine hospitality... If only we were to approach and welcome each other in true humility of heart! Then the separating walls would crumble and fall and we would experience abundant blessings.

May we take leave of this place today with a common vision and a shared hope; with a strengthened desire for unity.

I trust we will continue to walk together on our pilgrim way, encouraged and reinforced by the graces we have experienced as we have lived the parable of communion these past few days.

The call is to pursue the journey, filled with real respect and genuine esteem for the uniqueness of each other's different *charisms*, which together reflect the rich mystery of the Church.

Paul's final exhortation is a call to move beyond what Gregory of Nyssa sees as a very fundamental flaw in all our lives: the refusal to grow.

The apostle's call to us today could hardly be clearer. He invites us to mature, to grow in the Lord:

*Do not be children any longer (...) Be fully mature with the fullness of Christ Himself (...) Grow in all ways into Christ, who is the head by whom the whole body is fitted and joined together, every joint adding to its own strength, for each part to work according to its function. (...) So the body grows until it has built itself up in love.*

At the outset of our Conference I said that we are all called to be Christ for each other. Experience teaches us that *becoming like Christ is a long, slow process of growth.*

May we not lose heart as we await the day when Christ will be all in all – when Christ will be all in each one of us.

Amen!