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Elizabeth Shaw, Editor

# Teaching the Faith

A PUBLICATION OF THE  
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## ***Toward Christian Unity***

By Rev. Joseph Koterski, S.J.

*Third Sunday in Ordinary Time*

*January 26, 2014*

*Readings: Isaiah 8.23-9.3:*

*1 Corinthians 1.10-13, 17; Matthew 4. 12-23*

This past week, January 18-25, was the international Week of Prayer for Christian Unity jointly sponsored by the Pontifical Council for Christian Unity and the Commission on Faith and Order of the World Council of Churches. In continuity with this theme, among the readings the Church sets before us today is a passage from 1 Corinthians containing Paul's plea against division within the Church. Though we have this scriptural warrant for focusing on Christian unity, at the same time it is clear that we need no special revelation to grasp that things would be much better were Christians more united. Sadly, there remains division between Catholic and Orthodox, between Catholic and Protestant, and within Catholicism itself. When the Church is divided, her enemies are not slow to exploit the weaknesses that result.

Cultivating Christian unity is admittedly tricky – but no less necessary for being difficult. Restoring unity in any relationship after a serious misunderstanding is no easy task. Hard feelings and the memory of old wounds are hard to shake. Maintaining unity can be tough, too, for there are always differences of custom and taste on questions that are genuinely matters of preference. But once we distinguish between matters of principle and matters of prudential judgment and between matters of doctrine and matters of discipline, there can be progress. What is needed on all sides is the humility to bow to truths that are higher and prior to any one of us, along with respect for legitimate differences of opinion on matters that are not cases of non-negotiable principle.

### ***The Popes and Christian Unity***

If there is such a thing as a papal playbook passed down from one pontiff to the next, some of its most important sections have to concern Christian unity.

Pope Francis has made repeated calls – most recently in *Evangelii gaudium* – to put aside internal quarrels where possible, for the sake of unity in the Church and for the achievement of her missionary goals. He issues this challenge both to counter the scandal of division among the followers of Christ and for the sake of greater effectiveness in dealing with the problems of contemporary society, and especially the poor.

His summons to work for unity is thus in deep conformity with *Unitas redintegratio*, Vatican II's document on ecumenism. Sometimes the steps involved in reconciliation have been painfully slow. In 1967 Pope Paul VI and Patriarch Athenagoras mutually removed the excommunications that had been imposed long centuries before. Despite returning the icon of the Theotokos to Patriarch Alexy II of Moscow, Pope John Paul II was unable to visit Russia and to promote Church unity in person. Happily, the icon that he gave back now rests in Tatarstan, where it first miraculously appeared.

While continuing to work – and to hope – for a resolution to the *Filioque* controversy, Pope John Paul II at least found a way to promote unity between Catholicism and Orthodoxy by praying the Creed with representatives of some Orthodox Churches in Greek – and thus without saying the *Filioque* but also without denying its significance. Although Pope Francis apparently did not receive an invitation to visit Russia when he recently hosted Vladimir Putin in Rome, one wonders if the Bergoglian charm will not eventually win the day.

### ***Working at All Levels***

Not all of the work toward unification, of course, takes place at such high levels. Even when the time is not yet ripe for the formal reconciliation of large ecclesial bodies, there is much good work to be done at lower levels. The excellent cooperation in pro-life activities by Christians from across the spectrum is evidence of the real possibilities for social and political cooperation. We recognize the strength that comes from unity of action on matters where there is already common understanding.

But we should also recognize the difference between genuine unity and superficial surrogates. To suggest, as Pope Francis has done in some recent interviews, that there can sometimes be too much focus on certain neuralgic moral problems is different from saying that Church unity can be purchased by pretending that individual opinions at variance with the clear and correct teachings of the Church on these problems are somehow acceptable.

Instead, there may be better ways to approach individuals with views contrary to those of the Church. Pierre Favre, S.J., an early companion of Saint Ignatius Loyola whom Pope Francis quotes, explained his own style of evangelization by noting that he preferred not so much to enter into debates as to establish personal friendships with those who had left the Catholic Church in the early days of the Protestant Reformation. Where he could undo the knot of some personal issue, such as the situation of a monk who had abandoned his monastery or a priest who had taken a mistress, he often found that theological issues which people wanted to argue about simply dissolved with little or no additional effort. For the text of Favre's letter as well as a superb account of the historical problem of disunity in the Church, see *The Dividing of Christendom* by Christopher Dawson (Ignatius Press, 2009 [1965], p. 126).

### ***Where Compromise Is Possible, Where It Is Not***

We need to move beyond the media's sometimes disturbing distortions of the message of Pope Francis to a more serious appreciation for his approach to this question. His encouragement of a respect for difference on matters that are prudential, tactical, or merely disciplinary has been regularly accompanied by an insistence that there are certain doctrines of faith and morals on which no compromise is possible, even in the name of unity.

In the course of explaining, for instance, the Church's unremitting insistence on the need to protect various groups of innocent and vulnerable people and especially the unborn threatened by abortion, *Evangelii gaudium* explains in no uncertain terms that some things are non-negotiable: "Precisely because this involves the internal consistency of our message about the value of the human person, the Church cannot be expected to change her position on this question. I want to be completely honest in this regard. This is not something subject to alleged reforms or 'modernizations.' It is not 'progressive' to try to resolve problems by eliminating a human life" (214).

In the same paragraph the pope points to the need "to accompany women in very difficult situations, where abortion appears as a quick solution to their profound anguish, especially when the life developing within them is the result of rape or a situation of extreme poverty. Who can remain unmoved before such painful situations?" Thus, in the course of defending a non-negotiable principle against moral relativism, the pope wisely indicates the obligation to show Christian kindness and deep charity. In this way he simultaneously exemplifies what Christian unity demands: unity of mind and of heart.

All of us are called always to respect what the *Catechism of the Catholic Church* calls "the bonds of unity" (CCC 816) that are at issue when we profess our faith "in one, holy, Catholic, and apostolic Church." To pray as we do in the Creed that the Church is one is not to claim that we are already one in fact, for various ruptures have wounded "the unity of Christ's body" (817) in much the same way that bothers Saint Paul when he asks in today's reading, "Is Christ divided?"

### ***Three Points of Unity***

Paul testifies that charity must "bind everything together in perfect harmony" (Col 3.14), and according to the *Catechism*, the visible bonds of communion that will be needed for the unity of the Church include the profession of one faith as received from the apostles, the common celebration of divine worship, and especially of the sacraments, and apostolic succession through the sacrament of Holy Orders (CCC 815).

Why does the *Catechism* stress these three points? As we hear in today's passage from 1 Corinthians, the gospel that we must honor is not merely the teachings of Apollos or of Cephas. While Saint Paul himself died a martyr for Christ, it was not his death that redeemed us but the sacrifice of Christ (1 Cor 1.13). What we need for authentic communion is, first of all, understanding and acceptance of the one faith as handed down from the apostles. Some of the great apologists of the twentieth century understood this well. The Apostles' Creed is the basis as well as the limit of the arguments that figures like C. S. Lewis makes in *Mere Christianity* and G. K. Chesterton in *Orthodoxy*.

Second, the *Catechism* reminds us of the need for common celebration of divine worship. Interestingly, the Church understands community here to include the diversity involved in more than twenty rites that are all Catholic – Roman and Byzantine, Maronite and Coptic, to name just a few. The desire for Church unity looks toward the day when there will be a reunion of Orthodoxy and Catholicism, and the healing of every other rift.

Third, the *Catechism* draws our attention to the importance of apostolic succession through the sacrament of Holy Orders. The reason, as Blessed John Henry Cardinal Newman came to see so clearly in the course of his own spiritual journey, is that the sacraments are rituals not merely of human origin but instituted by Christ for our sanctification. Their reception may well be moments of great emotion, but what makes them efficacious is not the feeling that may be aroused but the gift of divine life by means of signs that Jesus chose to use for giving the grace that they signify.

The claim, for instance, that there can be genuine forgiveness of sins by a third party (neither the one who did wrong nor the one wronged) would amount to no more than wishful thinking if Christ has not really bestowed the power of the keys on the apostles and their successors.

Similarly, anyone's saying "This is my body" or "This is my blood" over bread and wine would be no more than a memorial of a past event, and not the moment when the living body of the risen and glorified Christ becomes present on the altar, if Christ had not really ordained the apostles as the first priests, and if they had not transmitted to others the powers they received from him.

At the highest level Christian unity is the unity of full communion in the body of Christ, which requires complete union of belief and practice. But there are other important kinds of unity, including a unity of action on common goals such as the evangelization of those who do not know Christ and the cooperation in action on particular social problems.

Factionalism of any sort disturbs this unity, and with this in mind we would each do well to make a careful examination of conscience, with firm purpose of amendment, in order to guard against this danger.

#### *About the Author*

*Rev. Joseph Koterski, S.J. teaches philosophy at Fordham University and is president of the Fellowship of Catholic Scholars. Among his recent publications is An Introduction to Medieval Philosophy: Some Basic Concepts (2009). For The Teaching Company he has produced lecture courses on Aristotle's Ethics, on Natural Law and Human Nature, and most recently on Biblical Wisdom Literature.*

### **FOR FURTHER READING**

*Common Declaration of His Holiness Pope Paul VI and the Ecumenical Patriarch Athenagoras I, available at: [http://www.vatican.va/roman\\_curia/pontifical\\_councils/chrstuni/ch\\_orthodox\\_docs](http://www.vatican.va/roman_curia/pontifical_councils/chrstuni/ch_orthodox_docs)*

*Francis, Evangelii gaudium, available at: [http://www.vatican.va/holy\\_father/francesco/apost\\_exhortations](http://www.vatican.va/holy_father/francesco/apost_exhortations)*

*Walter Cardinal Kaspar, "Unitatis Redintegratio: A New Interpretation After 40 Years," available at: <http://www.ewtn.com/library/CURIA/PCCUR40Y.HTM>*

*Rev. Timothy MacDonald, S.A., "Brief History of the Week of Prayer for Christian Unity, January 18-25, 2014," available at: [http://www.geii.org/week\\_of\\_prayer\\_for\\_christian\\_unity/week\\_of\\_prayer\\_history.html](http://www.geii.org/week_of_prayer_for_christian_unity/week_of_prayer_history.html)*

*Resources for the Week of Prayer for Christian Unity (January 18-25, 2014), available at: <http://www.usccb.org/beliefs-and-teachings/ecumenical-and-interreligious>*

*Vatican II, Decree on Ecumenism, Unitas redintegratio, available at: [http://www.vatican.va/archive/hist\\_councils/ii\\_vatican\\_council](http://www.vatican.va/archive/hist_councils/ii_vatican_council)*



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- ***When the Church is divided, her enemies are not slow to exploit the weaknesses that result.***
- ***Distinguishing matters of principle from matters of prudential judgment is essential for progress.***
- ***All sides need humility to bow to truths higher and prior to any one of us, along with respect for legitimate differences of opinion on matters that are not cases of non-negotiable principle.***
- ***The bonds of communion needed for Church unity include the profession of one faith as received from the apostles, the common celebration of divine worship, and apostolic succession through Holy Orders.***
- ***At the highest level Christian unity is the unity of full communion in the body of Christ, which requires complete union of belief and practice.***
- ***Other important kinds of unity include a unity of action on common goals such as evangelization and cooperation in action on particular social problems.***