Celebrating 100 Years of Prayer for Christian Unity
A People on Pilgrimage – In Christ’s Prayer

BY BROTHER JEFFREY GROS

When on cycle pilgrimage in northern Italy to the shrines of Sts. Mark, Charles Borromeo, Ambrose, Don Bosco, Augustine; and the monastery of Bosé, Dante’s Tomb, Canossa et al., it was like wandering through my old Catholic attic: nothing lost even if seldom used. A prayer of gratitude and hope, inspired by the history, holiness or struggles of the Church, was occasioned by each encounter along the way. There were several shrines to Blessed John XXIII but only one statue of Blessed Pius IX – that in the old Roman town of Imola where it was nestled in the cupola among the dozen plus other bishops, favored sons, who had been canonized. Prayers of gratitude for the two councils and for the ecumenical renewal of the papacy. Many churches had shrines to ecumenism, with icons and prayers, alongside two millennia of other devotions, the most popular today being Padre Pio. In the life of many of our churches the ecumenical movement will be just one more devotion, movement or advocacy group unless it is deeply grounded in Christian identity, history and prayer.

In another encounter on the pilgrimage, I was staying on the Adriatic beach in a Franciscan center, when I cycled over to evening vespers at a nearby church, St. Apollinaire in Classe! ... It happened to be the eve of the patronal feast. The Bishop was preaching to all of his gathered priests on the historic significance of Patriarch Bartholomew having celebrated the Divine Liturgy there earlier in the year; in Ravenna, which had been one of the last Imperial links in Italy with the Byzantine East. Situating ecumenical reconciliation prayerfully in grateful appreciation of history and hope is central to an authentic Christian spirituality.
In this brief essay I would like to touch on three dimensions of ecumenical prayer: 1) spiritual disposition, 2) types of ecumenical prayer, and 3) spiritual exercises serving ecumenical prayer.

Conversion of Heart

Change of heart and mind in Christ is a necessary spiritual disposition for openness to the Holy Spirit, and to the ecumenical imperative of the Gospel. An ecumenically informed Christian spirituality entails a new habit of mind, a new perspective for interpreting the Church; other churches with their pieties, liturgies and theology; and the results of a century of ecumenical pilgrimage, with its texts, relationships and symbolic moments. We have to ask God in prayer to be open to the grace of unity, and how we are called to respond to the grace of unity in service to ecclesial reconciliation.

Personal and institutional conversion to Christ’s will for the unity of the churches is a necessary prerequisite for being a Christian, and is especially central for those Protestant, Catholic and Orthodox churches who are committed to full communion in faith, sacramental life, and common witness. Reflection on the dynamics of conversion will help us in understanding the ecumenical conversion that underlies ecumenically informed prayer and spirituality. Likewise, a reconception of confessional identity, against a polemical, apologetic or ethno-centric distortion, will be fundamental in cultivating an ecumenical approach to prayer.

Dialogue is a key element in this spirituality. Pope Paul VI began his pontificate with this theme in Catholic life. Pope John Paul outlines three stages in this ecumenical spirituality: 1) the dialogue of love, 2) the dialogue of truth, and 3) the dialogue of conversion, which all lead to the dialogue of salvation. Other churches have their own confessional base and heritage to impel their ecumenical ecclesial self understandings.
Our love for other Christians and for their churches is not an affective feeling. It is rather an effective intention, a lifestyle and way of acting in the world. It is embodied in interest, service and listening. We often have to pray for our own conversion to this sort of love and service as we seek the internal purification of memory, the personal and institutional trust, and the level of empathetic understanding that will make facing the hard discussion of issues of truth possible.

In Orthodox Catholic relations it took from the 1965 transcending of the mutual anathemas to the convocation of theological dialogue in 1980 to move from the dialogue of love to the dialogue of truth. Each year, during that period and since, Patriarch and Pope exchange delegations and participate in prayer together on one another’s patronal feasts. During the years of tension in the dialogue of truth, where no results have been produced since 1993, the dialogue of love, common prayer for one another, and in some cases with one another, has sustained the relationship, otherwise quite fragile. With some ecumenical partners, patient love and attention is all that is possible for years. We can always pray for those who are unwilling to talk to us.

However, there must be a disposition in prayer that is open to facing the truth of the Gospel together. This begins by appreciating the gifts we receive from one another. Some are impatient with institutional progress toward full communion. However, we may need to know one another better and to deepen the bonds both of love and understanding before institutional form is given to the communion we experience.

In much of the Christian world, piety is stronger than the quest for, or interest in truth. However, both within our churches and in our difficult dialogues with one another, the Christian heritage – loving God and one another with our mind as well as our heart, and a willingness to learn a new perspective and put aside prejudice – are integral components of Christian
spirituality. Some will pit piety and activism against the dialogue of truth, but this is a false spiritual dichotomy and undermines the wholeness of the ecumenical movement. Prayer and discernment are necessary to keep an appropriate spiritual balance. Theological dialogue is a specialized task that requires technical preparation. However for those who participate and for those who encounter the results, it is itself a spiritual discipline enhanced by prayer and contributing to a more intimate experience of God and one another.

Finally, our prayer life is nurtured by a new habit of mind which leads through love to truth, ultimately to conversion. This conversion is an individual and corporate experience. We know many Christians who are holier than ourselves and who nourish the life of the Church more richly than we ourselves do. We are converted in mind and heart, gradually, to recognizing the ecclesial reality of other churches, as we recognize the holiness of fellow Christians in other communions.

The Emmaus story is the way of the ecumenical movement. It is through the dialogue of love and the dialogue of truth that Christ will lead us to the dialogue of conversion. Anyone who has participated in ecumenical dialogue realizes that when our “heart is burning within us” it is because of the gift of Christ, through our dialogue partners, disclosing the unity that exists and the gift which we gratefully receive through one another. We can be grateful to the Groupe de Dombes for giving serious reflection to ecumenical spirituality and conversion within it.

Modes of Prayer

Classical spiritual writers outline various types of Christian prayer, and several stages in the development of an active prayer life. These sources are invaluable helps in delineating an ecumenical spirituality. In the ecumenical reflection on prayer we will here only note the prayer of: 1) reparation or contrition, 2) the prayer of thanksgiving, and 3) the prayer intercession.
The Church is called to continued *renewal and reform*. The churches and Christians stand before God in a repentant, open spirit asking forgiveness for the sin of the past, praying for the purification of memories, and reflecting on those burdens of personal failing, institutional inertia and historical injustice that can only be rectified by the reconciling grace of Christ. Dialogues such as the Lutheran-Mennonite, Catholic-Reformed, and rituals such as the multiple apologies of United Methodists or Pope John Paul during the Jubilee Year, 2000 all demonstrate the importance of repentance of both persons and communities as the gateway to a new experience of Christ and the unity which it brings.

In specific places where tensions of the past cast a shadow on the present, services of repentance and reconciliation have provided a healing moment in the ecumenical pilgrimage, like the African and United Methodist services or the Presbyterian and Catholic services in New Mexico. Each time we approach the Lord’s Table with its rite of repentance in every liturgical tradition, we feel the hunger for the gathering of the full community in the celebration of the body and blood of Christ, and we suffer the realization that all of our celebrations lack fullness, as long as the fullness of Christian unity has yet to be achieved.

There is nothing so enriching as the prayer of *thanksgiving*: for the openness of our churches to the unity for which Christ prayed, for the richness of the spiritual heritage of other communities, and for the results of the century of encounter that is the modern ecumenical movement. Those of us of a certain age can fill hours of prayer in praise to God for the graces received through the encounter with ecumenical colleagues, for the deepening of our faith through reading of ecumenical texts, and for the spiritual riches of ecumenical worship. The changes already wrought in our churches, by God’s grace, are an amazing testimony to God’s providence in history.
Gratitude is particularly important during times of transition and tension. We may be unhappy with the actions of an ecumenical partner, as we might be of a friend, but the grace of the relationship is a greater gift than the burdens it brings. Our own church leadership may have embarrassed us, but the compassion of ecumenical colleagues sustains us. God has richly blessed the world with the witness of Christ in the Church, with the rich diversity among the cultures and traditions of the churches which testify to His message, and with the impulse to unity which we embody so zealously and yet feebly.

I suspect the most common prayer of the Christian is that of intercession. That is my experience. I am inordinately greedy, spiritually, it seems. That being the case, we need also to pray for one another, for each other’s churches, for the conversion of our own church to the path to unity, and for the specific dialogues and proposals with which we attempt to respond to God’s grace.

Yet we are not Pelagians in our prayer. That is our prayer for unity, for success of a dialogue and for the reception of their results; is not a magical incantation which disappoints us if God does not provide us with the results we demand. We place the outcome of the ecumenical movement before God in prayer, that the results may be directed by the Holy Spirit in her mysterious ways. We come to prayer with an appreciative detachment, knowing that the outcome of Christ’s reconciling will for Christians will be determined in his good providence, yes, with our collaboration, but in ways beyond our imaginings.

When we were young, we were taught to doff our hat, cross ourselves and say a prayer anytime we passed a church (Catholic – then – of course). It remains a good prayer discipline: to pray for the congregation and denomination, to thank God for the Word of God preached there, to recall the relationship of my own Church with that tradition and thank God for a gift received
from that church or ask God to know more about the gifts of that community to the ecumenical family, and to pray that bonds of communion may be deepened between the specific church and all who confess Christ.

In Memphis there is hardly a corner where one or two churches are not in sight-line, except the newest suburbs. Many of these churches carry the sermon theme, a scripture quote, or a religious quip – often humorous – on their marquee. As I cycle around the city of a Sunday morning, these passages provide good points for prayer and meditation, stimulating a line of prayer sometimes related to the congregation and its ministry, more often related to what God may be doing in my own life and ministry. Such prayer strengthens, before God, the bonds of communion that bind us together in the Holy Spirit.

Spiritual Disciplines

As with every dimension of the Christian’s relationship with God and with the human community, the array of traditional exercises is rich. Here I will only reflect on: 1) pilgrimage, 2) reflective prayer, 3) iconography, 4) commemorative celebrations, and 5) spiritual reading.

*Pilgrimage* has been part of the tradition since deep into the Hebrew Scriptures. While objections were raised to the abuses at the Reformation, the idea of sacred journeys and sacred places is alive in almost all Christian traditions, under whatever designation.

The Dean at my very Protestant seminary suggested that I offer a course on pilgrimage. It would cover the major spiritual destinations: the Holy Land, Rome, Santiago; some important minor ones important for our students; Wesley’s City road, Canterbury, Wartburg, Iona, etc.; and some from my own experiences, with Episcopal and Catholic bishops, for example. There are already Gethsemane Trappist Monastery, Celtic spirituality, Catholic Worker, and Mexican-
border immersions in the curriculum. The course on *Mary, Mystics and Martyrs* spends a day following the prayer and ministry horarium of Mother Teresa’s Missionaries of Charity.

However, we also want it to have a dimension of urban and local visits to hallowed sites. We thought the shrine to the yellow-fever workers, Episcopal-Catholic nuns; Mason Temple Church of God in Christ, where Martin Luther King, Jr. gave his *I Have Been to the Mountain Top* speech and the Lorraine Motel; Mother Liberty Christian Methodist Episcopal Church in Jackson where Southern and Black Methodists created a new reality; and any number of other places sacred to the traditions of one another in our ecumenical community.

The pilgrimage discipline of prayer; physical participation in God’s movement; learning directly from new people, places and traditions; mutual community support; historical reading and reflection; experiencing the patience necessary to reach a spiritual goal to which one is called; all are spiritually nourishing, filling the imagination with a lifetime of resources for prayer and reflection. The pilgrimage is a recurring theme in ecumenical spirituality, and an amazing fruitful dynamic for building ecumenical spiritual community.

It would be marvelous some day for a cycle caravan, representing the member churches of Churches Uniting in Christ to move across the country visiting, or calling forth clusters of the local member churches; stopping at historic sites from each tradition; studying together the heritages; preaching the word of unity in each visit; and eliciting a nationwide network of prayer for one another, and for the issues, especially of ordained ministry and racism, which lie at the core of the next steps on that pilgrimage.

Ecumenical colleagues in Los Angeles have taken the pilgrimage to Guadalupe, reflecting on its Christological significance, inculturation dynamics and ecumenical implications. Many Christians from a variety of traditions have visited the Azusa Street site commemorating
the birth of global Pentecostalism a century ago. I remember walking, prayerfully, through the
shrine of St. James in northern Spain with a Pentecostal colleague explaining the history, peity
and parallels with Pentecostal popular religiosity. The rector of the tomb of St. Teresa of Avila,
buried at Alba de Tormes, routinely brings Protestant devotees of the Saint’s writings to her
shrine, explicating how, for Catholics, shrines and relics nurture the apostolic faith. For Dutch
Reformed, it is always bracing and often therapeutic to see the ruins of the Duke of Alba’s castle.

Ecumenical texts are not always designed to be user-friendly, and certainly not for
**reflective prayer.** They often have another purpose, and another method of production. However,
from time to time they can be rich resources for ecumenical retreats, parish prayer and study
projects; and almost always for the private prayer of those equipped to appreciate them. Even
texts of one tradition can become ecumenical spiritual resources for reflection and prayer as
individuals or groups. For example, when the papal encyclical *Ut Unum Sint* appeared in 1995,
the US United Methodist- Catholic dialogue team covenanted with one another to read a
paragraph or so a day for private prayer and reflection between two meetings. Other texts, like
the United Methodist *This Holy Mystery* could be used for ecumenical Eucharistic prayer and
reflection. Clergy and educators’ retreats designed around *Baptism, Eucharist and Ministry* could
enrich the ecumenical spirituality and prayer life of a local community. Certainly common prayer
and reflection around the weekly lectionary has enriched the prayer and preaching lives of many
ministers.

I find amazing the development of the use of imagery among churches that have
traditionally been very reticent about Christian art. Likewise, the devotional life of Anglicans,
Catholics, Lutherans and others have been enriched by the study and meditative use of Byzantine
icons. The Rubelev Trinity, for example, has almost become an ecumenical cliché. However, at
another level, we have been able to reappropriate our common roots in the spirituality of the incarnational understanding of Christian representation. It seems also important to realize that our prayer life can be enriched by other imagery from beyond our own traditions.

During the decade of ministry in activist Manhattan, St. Herman of Alaska, hermit-missionary from the Russian Orthodox Church to the new world, was the patron of my office, bringing me back to the transcendent when the politics of church and society seemed intractable. The castle of Luther’s 1521 exile and translation labors, the Wartburg, became my icon for the care, patience and long term vision required for the communication of God’s word of reconciliation, during the fourteen years’ ministry in Washington, DC. Symbols and images are important prayer-reminders, and windows to God’s call to ministry and God’s action in our past history.

*Commemorative celebrations* are important moments in our corporate prayer life together. Beyond the usual Week of Prayer and Martin Luther King, Jr. Day, Thanksgiving, Holy Week and Pentecost, there are a host of special occasions and commemorations that can enrich our common life of prayer and witness. The anniversaries of particular church events, like the annual Reformation Sunday, reinterpreted to serve reconciliation; the periodic commemoration of the *Joint Declaration on the Doctrine of Justification* in Methodist, Lutheran and Catholic communities; local dedication and anniversary celebrations and the like provide rich and diverse opportunities for common prayer and celebration.

It would be marvelous for every community and congregation around the country to have a prayer service of thanksgiving and petition for the recent founding of Christian Churches Together in the United States (2006), gathering representatives of congregations representing the five families that are represented in this new instrument of common witness in our society. As
we prepare for the 500th anniversary of the initiation of the Reformation, 2017, our spiritual creativity needs to provide a host of common prayer experiences, and spiritual resources for nurturing our agreements and consciousness of God’s free grace given in Jesus Christ, with no merit of our own, showing the fruits of justification in a life of good works.

Finally, *spiritual reading* in other traditions helps to internalize the Christian intent of the narratives of leaders and spiritual figures in other churches. We can be grateful to Paulist Press and other publishing houses that have given an ecumenical focus to the spirituality resources available to us. When a new volume comes out, say on Calvin or the Quakers, I am most likely to choose *Review for Religious* for a review, since not only will it provide spiritual resources for those active in ministry with these churches, it may also touch the vast array of retirees who pray for the ecumenical movement after a rich life of ministerial service.

Reading the biographies and autobiographies of ecumenical pioneers, or leaders from different nations and ethnic groups has enriched my spiritual understanding of what is necessary to sustain an ecumenical life of prayer. Providing students with the life of an ecumenist of their tradition enables them to identify with the movement, its spirituality and the prayer life entailed in a church vocation with an ecumenical commitment. The lives of Benjamin Mays, Lesslie Newbigin, Albert Outler, Robert McAfee Brown or Augustine Bea are all stories that should nourish the prayer life of future generations of Christians, rooted in their particular heritage but serving the unity of the Church.

Some may see this essay as a spirituality of glory and not of the cross. Another essay can be devoted to the struggles and asceticism of ecumenical prayer. However, beginning with a Eucharistic prayer of thanksgiving seems the way to start.
The Lord of history has gifted those of us who have lived through recent decades to see developments in our church and among the churches that was unimaginable a century ago. The annual Week of Prayer is one of the great gifts of that opening century of the modern ecumenical movement. We can be grateful to Father Paul Watson and Mother Laurana White as well as to Paul Couturier for their witness to God’s grace in their lives, and God’s call to a vocation that is now shared much more broadly and deeply than any of them could have imagined. Their unceasing prayer, their leadership in the spiritual life, the legacy of the Atonement community and of the Lyons based ecumenical leadership, have produced results in God’s providence that far outstrips their own initiatives. May our prayer be one of gratitude for their leadership, of fidelity to their vision, and of hope for a horizon in God’s service that outstrips our own imagination.

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