

Praying together: The call to unity

The Revd Leon Carberry

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All of these with one accord devoted themselves to prayer, together with the women and Mary the mother of Jesus, and with his brothers. (Acts of the Apostles 1: 14)

In January 2000, Cardinal Roger Etchegaray was preaching in St Paul's Basilica in Rome at Vespers to mark the Feast of the Conversion of St Paul, the day which brings to a close the Week of Prayer for Christian Unity. He said that on the path to unity, it is not primarily a question of Christians looking more deeply into one another's eyes or of shaking one another's hands longer despite what divides them, but of looking together to the Lord and of reaching their hands out to him, in common obedience to the Holy Spirit whom he sent us. He reinforces this with a story:

Do you know the legend that deserves to be a true story which an Orthodox monk told me? Here it is. After Easter, when Christ was about to ascend into heaven, he lowered his eyes to the earth and saw it plunged in darkness, except for some small lights over the city of Jerusalem. As he ascends he meets the Angel Gabriel, who was used to earthly missions and who asks him:

"What are those tiny lights?"

"They are the Apostles gathered around my Mother, and as soon as I reach heaven my plan is to send the Holy Spirit to them so that these small sparks will become a great blaze that will enflame the whole earth with love".

The angel dares to answer:

"And what will you do if the plan does not succeed?"

After a moment of silence, the Lord replies:

"I have no other plans!"

Are we convinced that this is the Lord's only plan? The only one that can withstand the forces of division? A plan to give full power to the Holy Spirit who unites all Christians in one and the same love before uniting them in the same faith. A marvelous venture whose source and model is the Holy Trinity. A demanding venture for the Church to become fully what she is, the living Body of Jesus Christ, a body that is diversified and one, ultimately reconciled in the truth and freedom of Love. Then ecumenism will be filled with hope opening the way to the inexhaustible victories of Love in the midst of a humanity that is rootless, wandering, blind and violent, but despite all, thirsting for unity.

This is why prayer will accompany, and not only introduce, every ecumenical step of a doctrinal or social nature, since it is prayer that

enables us to reach the Holy Spirit in the depths of life where he dwells, to evangelize the roots as well as the fruits of division.¹

Further he points to ecumenical prayer as not merely spiritual, reserved for those who can do nothing else for unity, but to spur on all Christians to discover and to accept the progress made at the level of common thought and action. He says:

*The doctrinal agreements that here and there mark the dialogues of experts are meaningless, unless through pastoral education they reach every level of an ecclesial community.*²

As our reading from Acts (1: 12-14) this morning takes us to the Upper Room, can we look to the Upper Room as a place of waiting on God the Holy Spirit and perceive the seeds of faith, hope, and love sown in the fertile soil of “the apostles, the women, Mary, and His brothers”—those so close to Our Lord that they were drawn into the Upper Room following the Ascension of Our Lord, “awaiting the power from on high” promised in Pentecost.

Fr Peter Marr invited me to lead this meditation as the Anglican turn in this time slot for a daily meditation. My American accent, despite thirty-two years of living in England, will be a prompt or reminder that the Anglican Communion is a bigger entity than its mother, The Church of England.

There is a current trend in the Church of England to explore different “ways of being church”; considering new initiatives that constitute “fresh expressions”. For me, the Upper Room presents the way of being Church – “all with one accord”, devoting ourselves to prayer. And as Mary was there, and as men and women were there together, she must be acknowledged and received as given to us by God. But despite the recent report from the Anglican-Roman Catholic International Commission entitled *Mary Hope and Grace in Christ*—there are many of my brother and sister Anglicans who see no relevance or place for Mary in their devotion or in their view of what it is ‘to be Church’.

The Venerable Bede wrote in the early 8th century a *Commentary on the Acts of the Apostles*. He quotes St Jerome as saying that Luke was a physician and “all of his words are likewise medicine for the ailing soul”. So, can we find here some medicine for the ills of Christendom in our day?

St John Chrysostom in his commentary on Acts cites the reference to ‘continuing in prayer with one accord’ as “a powerful weapon in temptation, and to this day they have been trained.” But he goes on to say, “temptation directed them to this; for they exceedingly feared the Jews.” So what of their fears? What of our fears about the future for Christianity, united or not?

I would like us to consider the passage of scripture for today (Acts 1: 12-14) as both a stepping stone and a reference point in considering some of

¹ Taken from *L'Osservatore Romano* Weekly Edition in English (2 February 2000) p.4.

² Ibid.

the issues that challenge Christians and our witness and work for unity today. How might we be “trained” to strive and discern the work of the Spirit, ‘that power from on high’ given and still at work in our day.

I think there is a real danger that the will of God, so called, can be a mere projection of our will as individuals, or the will of a particular denomination. A distinctive and contemporary contemplation of this problem can be found in the writing of Fr Gregory, an Anglican monk of Crawley Down, The Community of the Servants of the Will of God. The Community has recently published *Unity, Holy Tradition and Contemplation—Understanding the Holy Spirit in the Life of the Church*.

I would add at this point, that Fr Gregory and his Community have been engaged with the True Life in God movement and the messages of unity offered by Vasula Ryden. I mention this as some of you will know of that movement’s ecumenical endeavor for unity in accord with what Our Lord may be revealing in current times. This doesn’t figure directly in what I have to share with you in this talk – rather I shall be looking, as does Fr Gregory, to St Maximus the Confessor.

We will begin by looking at what St Maximus says about the “Conversion of the Fallen Human Will” and conclude with a consideration of “The Treasures of Mary’s Heart”.³

For St Maximus, God is wholly the All-ruling Creator of the universe, and man in Christ is called to serve ‘synergetically’ as a Microcosm (a small universe enabled by God to contain the large universe within himself) and Mediator in Christ, for restoring the cosmos to its proper goal in God in accord with His eternal plan and purpose. For St Maximus, there is no suggestion that God could make up his plans as He goes along, nor could there be any contingencies along the way such as might require correction.

God is entirely free from any creaturely constraints, and His freedom is most clearly manifested through Christ's embracing of the Cross, through which the Wisdom of God for bringing into being a new creation was revealed in all its majesty and splendour. Indeed, as St Paul describes this Wisdom of the Cross, whereby He has saved humankind from sin and death, 'God has consigned all to disobedience, that he may have mercy on all'; though clearly even he is astonished by this affirmation of boundless hope, for he goes on to exclaim, 'Oh, the depths of the riches and wisdom and knowledge of God! How unsearchable are his judgements and inscrutable his ways!' (Romans 11: 32-33).

This same Christ is accordingly named 'the Lamb of God slain from the foundation of the world' (Revelation 13: 8 KJV), for He was predestined to take away the sin of the world and to reveal the new Body of the Resurrection. The transfigured cosmos is no mere collection of individual saved souls. Rather, beginning with Christ and then with those who are Christ's, this new creation is being formed by their gathering of all things -in heaven and on earth into the unity of the crucified and risen Body of the Lord (cf. Romans 8: 18-25), the final goal for all things made new, the one Body of

³ Fr Gregory CSWG, *Unity, Holy Tradition and Contemplation—Understanding the Holy Spirit in the Life of the Church* (CSWG Press 2007), pp.33-40.

Christ on earth is destined by God to be the visible, temporal witness. Therefore the unity of the Church needs to become the primary concern and purpose in life for all her members in this world.

True to the Church's confession of there being both a human and a divine will and energy united in the one Person of Jesus Christ, St Maximus shows us how this perception of Christ's nature gives us the key to a clearer understanding of the gravity for us all of the Fall of Adam and Eve, and also of how the Lord has restored this fallen human nature by taking it upon Himself through the Incarnation. Satan tempted Adam and Eve to doubt the trustworthiness and the foreknowledge of God, after God had commanded them, 'You shall not eat of the fruit of the tree that is in the midst of the garden, neither shall you touch it, lest you die'. Satan did this by suggesting to Eve, 'You will not surely die. For God knows that when you eat of it your eyes will be opened, and you will be like God, knowing good and evil' (Genesis 3: 1-5).

Satan as ever is the liar and the lie he sold to Eve, and that Eve passed on to Adam, is that the wisdom of God consists in His knowing good and evil. God however, as Maximus saw so clearly, knows only His own supreme goodness, and the goodness that He has imparted to His creatures in creating them in His own image. Indeed, evil has no real substance; for it is only the result of the distortion of good creatures, or creaturely actions. Nevertheless temptations to evil, when entered into by humans, become sins in relation to God, and do finally result in death, because they repeat that first separation of Adam and Eve from God, brought about by disobedience to His commandment; for His original will for His children was eternal life through their full accord with His purposes for them.

The consequence for Adam and Eve of their entering into temptation was that henceforth they carried the burden of what St Maximus calls a 'gnomic will', that is, a will that can know and must constantly choose between what is perceived subjectively as good or evil. St Maximus does not try to explain precisely how this sinfully weakened gnomic will is transmitted, any more than St Paul does where he says, 'sin came into the world through one man, and death through sin, and so death spread to all men because all sinned' (Romans 4: 12).

St Maximus, along with St Gregory of Nyssa, assumes that we humans are all caught up in a world typified by the necessity of procreation, in which all are subject to the repeated temporal cycle which moves from conception to death; for us all, the gnomic will must inevitably be a ruling factor of human life as long as this cycle persists. But Christ has come to set us free from this temporal cycle by filling all of time with the eternal presence of the Kingdom of God in the Holy Spirit, and thereby overcoming its formerly repetitive character.

Two contrasting ways of entering into this freedom are the monastic consecration to celibacy, and the Sacrament of Holy Matrimony, which opens up marriage to the kingdom of God, while simultaneously affirming that there is no marriage in the eternity of heaven.

The union between man and woman is guaranteed henceforth by the union in heaven between Christ and His Holy Mother, Mary. To preserve the

integrity of these two ways of passing over into the eternal kingdom of God, while still abiding on earth, is accordingly a major concern of the law of Christ, and should therefore be observed by all the Churches. One can easily see why Satan, the liar, is hard at work stirring up disorder within the context of Christian chastity. The Holy Spirit, by comparison reveals His presence as a lover and guardian of chastity, as He is of the integrity of the whole Tradition and sacramental system of the Church.

Not even the fall of humankind can prevent progress towards the consummation of the great plan of God for His new creation. The attainment of this goal remains certain because 'the Lamb of God, slain from the foundation of the world' has already been empowered to overcome sin and death, without in any way being defiled by them. (Revelation 13: 8)

Meditating on certain New Testament texts (I Peter 1: 18-20 and II Corinthians 5: 21), St Maximus makes that point that Christ, though tempted as we are, remained different, though not separate from us, in that He was 'yet without sin'; and though made to be sin, He 'knew no sin'. An excellent example of how Jesus deals with Satan and temptation to sin can be seen in the Gospel accounts of the Temptations in the Wilderness. Jesus recognizes the approach of the Tempter, and counters and defeats the Tempter by the affirmation of the righteous word of God, and the divine energy that always accompanies and accomplishes whatever that word affirms.

Some have objected in terms of 'How can Christ overcome the "gnomic will", such as afflicts the sons and daughters of Adam and Eve, if He does not himself share in the gnomic will?' St Maximus states that the gnomic will is not a faculty that you 'have' or 'don't have' by nature. The obligation to choose between a relative good and evil was never the will of God for man. It is a pseudo-freedom of choice, which when cultivated, leads to enslavement to the powers of darkness and separates us from the light of Christ. This gnomic will entered the human condition as a distortion due to man's failure to depend upon the light of discernment, as afforded by the Spirit of truth. Christ, as the bearer and restorer of the Holy Spirit to humankind, could not be burdened with the gnomic will. Yet He could carry the burden of our sin, 'who through the eternal Spirit offered himself without blemish to God', and so suffer and die for and from sin, while manifesting the righteousness of One who 'always does the will of the Father' (cf. Hebrews.9: 14; John 6: 38).

By His sacrificial return to the Father, through the death and resurrection, Christ reconciles to the Father all those the Father has put into His hands, in spite of their continuing to be sinners, until they too have been trained and purified by the Spirit of the Father to make the single choice for the will of God, that can free them all from the burden of the multiple choices of the gnomic will. This is the fullness of love and true freedom of the Spirit, the restoration of the human will to its true nature, whereby all can be enabled as the Lord expects of them, to 'stay awake at all times, praying that you may have strength to escape all these things that are going to take place, and to stand before the Son of Man' (Luke 21: 36).

In practical terms, the recovery of our true freedom involves first of all using our will, even though it has fallen into a gnomic condition and beginning with repentance, to choose the good will of God, as far as we can

understand and discern it. We must strive to overcome the passions – joys, hopes, grievances and fears which intrude within a life governed by the gnostic will; those things which harm the integrity of the person by fragmenting his or her capacity to relate to God in faithful obedience. We set out on the road of repentance and faith, so as to draw down again from the Father the grace of the Holy Spirit, even though this involves using the gnostic will, until by persevering, the will ceases to be 'gnostic', and moves toward knowing again only that good which is of God.

May the Holy Spirit grant to us the vision of that goodness of God that can hold and motivate the will of each of us on our journey to this freedom.

The journey may be thought of in these terms. I quote from an article by Athanasios N. Papathansiou in *Sobornost* (28: 1), where he points out that:

*Conversion to the Kingdom of God is not first and foremost a matter of going back, but of going forward. In other words it is not a matter of human beings returning to some lost paradise, but rather the entire universe attaining to the future for which it was created, but which has yet to become a reality. Here I am referring, of course, to the eschatological Kingdom of God, where decay, evil and death will be abolished. Whereas in general the future is regarded as an effect of the past, for the Church the cause of the past (and of the present) is precisely the future. The Incarnation of the Son of God did not take place as a result of the (past) Fall of our forefathers, but for the sake of the (future) transformation of creation into the Kingdom.*⁴

This kind of eschatological perspective of time in relation to God's eternal plan is generally missing among Christians of our day. It needs to be recovered in order to see how all the issues concerning unity are inter-related and should be pursued while there is still time. Perhaps it is for this reason that both Pope John Paul II and Benedict XVI, in the context of the renewal and reunion of all Churches, have pointed to the need for the Church to learn to 'breathe again with both of her lungs', Eastern and Western.⁵

To conclude, I would like us to reflect on the 'Treasure of Mary's Heart' which she brings to the Upper Room for the birth of the Church. It seems important to consider the response of Mary to the initiative of her Son in repairing of that freedom of the Spirit given by God to humanity.⁶

Just as Adam and Eve wounded and divided our nature by agreeing to their disobedience, so Mary and her Son reversed this disobedience, and healed and united again our nature—she first of all at the Annunciation, and He through His obedience unto death on the Cross, with His Mother's participation when the 'sword' of grief pierced her heart at the foot of the Cross (cf. Luke 2: 35).

In this way Mary has become firmly united, heart to Heart with her Son by the Holy Spirit of obedience, and has also shared with Him in His work of repairing and restoring the original, God- created ground of unity and co-operation in the Holy Spirit between man and woman. We can now

⁴ Ibid, p.39.

⁵ Ibid, p.40; cf also *Ut Unum Sint*, English translation, p.62.

⁶ Ibid, pp. 56-58.

properly speak of restored synergy of human persons in Christ with the Spirit, but also of a recovered complementary synergy between men and women, resting on the shared ground of the unity of the hearts of Christ and His Mother, for the more complete accomplishing of the will of God for the unity of all.

Could this be the key to the resolution of controversial 'gender issues'? May it be the ground for manifesting the unity and complementarity between men and women? May it be a revelation to the Churches as to why the Lord chose only men to serve as His apostles and their successors? May it be a guiding principle in determining boundaries of chastity in sexual behaviour, as the tradition suggests that without chastity there can be no synergy with the Holy Spirit? For Satan, the liar and deceiver is ever at work to distort Holy Tradition and to multiply divisions both within and between Churches. And further, I would say from an Anglican point of view, it does not seem that a synodical system of church government, designed on parliamentary lines, has adequate spiritual protection to keep Satan out.

Let us pray for the Holy Spirit to lead us to the roots of our theological problems. Let us pray for the courage and perseverance needed to wait upon God, and to avoid superficial answers based only on the perspectives of sociology or psychology ; to avoid the temptation and satisfaction of each going our own way .

Let us recall the verse from the Acts of the Apostles which we began with: *All of these with one accord devoted themselves to prayer, together with the women and Mary the mother of Jesus, and with his brothers.* (Acts 1: 14)

Like those gathered in the Upper Room, so may we with one accord devote ourselves to prayer, together with Mary the Mother of Jesus, in response to His calling upon us to be His brothers and sisters; to be one in Him.