

Week of prayer for Christian unity 2005 Introduction to the theme for the year 2005

Christ, the one Foundation of the Church (1 Cor 3:1-23)

The situation in which the theme was developed is marked by new possibilities for church growth. The churches in Slovakia have experienced more than a decade of renewal and growth after four decades of living in a political situation which, while allowing the churches to exist, attempted to impede their growth and limit their witness in society. In the process of preparing the theme for this year's Week of Prayer for Christian Unity, the preparatory group reflected on the following questions: 1. What is the foundation on which the new "existence" of their churches is being built? 2. Is there a space to grow in unity as the respective confessional communities grow? 3. What are the means for strengthening the service of the church?

The New Testament preserves letters written to the churches as encouragement for their spiritual growth since they lived in a world often hostile to the values of the gospel. One of these is the first letter to the Christians of Corinth from which the members of the preparatory group drew their guidance. The following reflections provide a theological and pastoral introduction to this year's theme and the eight days drawing principally from the Slovak context and the recent experience of its Christian communities. These questions may challenge all churches and Christian communities in whatever context they find themselves - whether of growth or decline.

Growing in faith is growing in unity

While reflecting on the Slovak experience of growth, it was realized that this growth is truly a gift to all the churches in Slovakia. People, who previous to 1989 avoided church fellowship, began turning to the churches with the important questions in their lives. This meant that the churches needed to learn how to respond by communicating the gospel in this new context of growth. This situation was not unlike that of Paul who had aided the church in Corinth in its phase of growth.

However, the process of growth is not without its setbacks and problems. Paul observed that the Corinthians were still not ready for the solid food that provides for growth in faith. It is normal to begin growing with milk. However, if after a time, the body cannot absorb solid food, there is something wrong, unhealthy in the body.

Paul used a very strong expression to describe the people in Corinth. He calls them "people of the flesh" because he sees them lacking in spiritual maturity. They are still living according to human inclinations indicated by their petty jealousy and quarrelling among themselves (**day 1**). How can Paul use these strong words to describe a people whose church is so rich in diverse gifts and so full of life? He himself knows of this richness and comments on it in 1 Cor 14.

The lack of spiritual maturity was not evident in the absence of lofty thoughts or visible signs of power. The congregation was rich in gifts and works. They were not poorer or weaker than any other congregation in this regard. In spite of all of this Paul describes the church as one of the flesh, as infants. Why? Because there was a lack of unity among them.

In turn, the churches in Slovakia have asked themselves how authentic their growth has been these past 15 years of new freedom and new possibilities? What is the value of their achievements if there are still tensions among them as different confessions? The churches in Slovakia have realized the need to pray for growth in faith marked by unity in service and mutual understanding.

Humility in service unites

The reason for division in Corinth was not due to the rejection of any basic tenets of the faith. The problem in Corinth was a matter of not leaving behind the old unredeemed patterns of human behaviour. In spite of the many spiritual gifts the Corinthians had been blessed with, there was something lacking: they were not united in the same mind and the same purpose. Paul rejects this way of being Christian. He does not fall into the trap of jealousy of other leaders when some people adore him and identify themselves as those who belong to him. He insists that neither he nor Apollos are “lords” to whom people would belong. They are “servants through whom others came to believe” (1 Cor 3:5). Even this ministry was not exercised through their own power. In fulfilling this service, they were completely dependent on the grace of the Lord. They performed the service “as the Lord assigned to each”.

This attitude shows humility and greatness at the same time. Paul’s understanding of service is distinct from a worldly perspective, wherein to be “only a servant” is the opposite pole of wanting to be served as somebody important in the church. Jesus teaches us in Matthew 20:28: “The Son of Man came not to be served but to serve”. Therefore, all the gifts received need to be put at the service of the plan of God since these should point back to the author of these gifts and not the recipient.

Paul understands that the fruit of this service will be different since it is built on cooperation. This is indeed the reality experienced in the Slovakian context. Because of a new situation, namely the mobility of people, ministers frequently do not see the fruits of the word that was planted. Now, as in the pauline context, some plant while others tend to the daily needs of growth, and still others harvest. In the past, people remained in the same villages and towns so that their pastors tended to their spiritual needs from planting the seed of the gospel to its maturity in the fruits that were harvested. Today there may be many involved in this process of growth. This process is not without problems. Even within churches of the same confession this leads to tensions among fellow servants as it did in Corinth. Moreover it is often forgotten that it is not the ministers who enable faith to grow but it is “only God who gives the growth” (**day 2**).

This situation causes us to pause and ask: to what extent are the tensions among us really caused by differences in our teaching? How much pride is

there still among us? To what extent does a longing for power control our actions instead of a desire and a readiness to serve?

Paul had to confront a similar situation among Christians in Corinth. His solution was that humility in service unites. This, too, is what the churches are learning in their life together. We realize that we are co-workers, working together with God, each building on the one foundation laid by God, namely Jesus Christ. In knowing this we are then able to support each other and act according to the grace God has given to each of us (**day 3**).

Building service on the one foundation

The responsibility that we have in our service is great. The foundation has been laid, but the edifice that rises on it depends on the work of each builder. How will each use the gift that God gives? Paul makes reference later in his letter that there is a variety of gifts and services given but that it is the same Lord who bestows them. This diversity is given by the same Spirit for the common good and for unity of the body (1Cor 12: 4ff). These gifts must then be used appropriately for the work of edifying the church and of building bridges as a sign of hope and the fruit of unity in Christ (**day 4**).

What is clear for Paul and for our context is that the work that has been done in building will be tested so that the sort of work done by each will be brought to light. In the past, the churches have at times been caught up with themselves and in their agendas, and not with tending to the proclamation of Christ crucified and risen as the foundation of Christian life. Paul considered himself accountable before God for what he had accomplished. In the same way, the churches need to be accountable not only before God but to each other as co-workers in their service. The kind of work done will reveal the quality of our discipleship. (**day 5**).

In attempting to encourage the Christians in Corinth, Paul needed to affirm the nature of who they were. Because they have received the gift of the Spirit they have become the temple of God and bear God's image. This reality challenges these Christians to live united with the Spirit who in turn unites them to Christ, the one foundation (**day 6**).

From our human experiences and the histories that we recount, we can begin to see the folly of our ways which have caused divisions among those who follow Christ. This foolishness is what Paul began with in his letter to the Corinthians when he exhorts them to be in agreement and avoid divisions since they should be of the same mind and purpose (1 Cor 1:10). We have made from the one Church of Christ, many divisions, founded on disagreements since we have not been of the same mind and purpose but have worked against one another. This may be seen as the fruit of living in a world where such traits as individualism and competition are considered to be wisdom. By contrast, Paul proclaims the message of Christ who humbled himself to accept our human weaknesses even unto death, thus revealing "what God has prepared for those who love him" (1 Cor 2:9) (**day 7**).

Paul makes a connection between different co-workers who are in the service of the gospel. Then he sets this fellowship into a context of universal and cosmic unity. He is assuring those, who in different times and different ways are building on the one foundation, that they together belong to Christ. They are of Christ. If we belong to Christ then we also belong to God. Paul is aware of how God has acted in creation through Christ to make all things new and to reconcile all things. As fellow servants and ministers, we are united when we realize that our service starts in Christ and is directed to God who has laid the one foundation of our faith and from whom our unity comes (**day 8**).

The eight days of prayer are an invitation to reflect together as different churches, to ask a blessing for each other and to see where we can grow together in unity.