

WEEK OF PRAYER FOR CHRISTIAN UNITY 2006

Introduction to the theme

"Where two or three are gathered in my name, I am there among them" (Mt 18:20)

There is more that unites us than divides us - this is the great discovery that lies behind the thrust of the ecumenical movement. The greatest uniting point of all is the presence of the Risen Christ who promised his disciples he would be with them till the end of time. At the end of Matthew's gospel we see Jesus make this promise right after sending forth his followers with the task of making disciples of all nations, baptising them in the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit (cf. Mt 28:19-20). He was aware that they would have to face difficulties of all sorts, and did not want to leave them as orphans on their mission (cf. Jn 14:18). He promised he would remain with them. He is 'Emmanuel', that is, 'God is with us' (Mt 1: 23).

The gospels tell us of diverse ways that Jesus, our risen Lord, is present in our midst: when his word is proclaimed and lived, and when the eucharistic bread and wine are presented in remembrance of him; in the presence of the little child, the hungry, the prisoner, the least in our midst; in each neighbour; in the presence of those who carry forth his mission and his ministry in the world. The theme of this year's Week of Prayer for Christian Unity, from Mt 18: 20, sets before us a promise of Jesus which finds its home within this context: "where two or three are gathered in my name, I am there among them".

Matthew situates this promise of Jesus within the framework of an instruction about the life and order of the church community, concerned with the care for the least, with how the church ministers to members who have gone astray, and with the tendency to place limits on forgiveness. Mt 18 contains strong texts of judgement. These texts are signposts to the Christian community, indicating where its members are falling short in their responsibility as disciples. They are balanced by texts which stress God's concern for every member of the community and invite an unlimited willingness to forgive, reflecting God's own boundless capacity for reconciliation. The chapter provided the early Christian community with clear instructions from Jesus that building up the community is not something about which they could be indifferent. The community which gathers around the person and words of Jesus must do all it can to ensure that it lives in harmony. It is in this context that the Lord invites his hearers to trust in the power of common prayer, and ultimately, in his abiding presence within the community who gathers in his name.

During the Week of Prayer for Christian Unity, and indeed in prayer for unity throughout the year, we are invited to a profound awareness that unity is a grace and that we need continually to ask for this gift. Amidst our efforts to foster the unity of our own communities and of the unity of all Christians, we do well to be attentive to the importance of gathering ecumenically to pray in Jesus' name. Whenever we do so, we are invited to trust in the power of prayer offered in the presence of Jesus, who

promised his disciples: "Again, truly I tell you, if two of you agree on earth about anything you ask, it will be done for you by my Father in heaven" (Mt 18:19). What matters is not so much a plurality of voices, but the fact that these voices are united in prayer. The still voice that speaks in each of our hearts is strengthened when we come together in his name. As we pray, let us remember and give thanks for much progress in recent decades towards unity among Christians; Jesus Christ has been present among us through the power of his Holy Spirit, praying with us to the Father.

The promise that Jesus will be in our midst is not to be limited to the community gathered in worship. Because the love of the triune God is made incarnate in Jesus Christ, we are enabled through Christ to live a life of communion rooted in the Trinity. Through the presence of his Holy Spirit, the risen Lord desires to be with us at all times and places, sharing our worries, advising us, journeying with us, entering our homes and workplaces, reviving our joy with his presence that leads us to the heart of the Father. He wants us to feel God's nearness, God's strength, God's love. He wants to be among us so that he himself can witness, through us, to his love and life in our home and workplace, school and neighbourhood.

It is worth remembering that many things have been done throughout Christian history "in Jesus' name", things which resemble neither his teaching nor the way set forward in his living and dying. Our individual and communal histories provide us with many reasons for repentance. We do well to read Mt 18:20 in light of the primacy given to the commandment of love in John's gospel: "This is my commandment, that you love one another as I have loved you" (Jn 15:12) and "By this all will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another" (Jn 13:35). Jesus' presence where two or three gather in his name is closely linked to the love the 'two or three' have for one another.

To gather in the name of Jesus means to share in the love he brought on earth. This love is not reducible to philanthropy, solidarity or benevolence; it is more than friendship or affection. It is a self-giving, suffering love, one which "bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things" (1 Cor 13:7). It is a love that demands prudence and patience as we discern the presence of the Lord and the direction in which he is leading us.

Being as receptive as possible to the presence of Jesus in our midst requires that Christians learn to live an 'ecumenism of life' together, accompanying our theological search for unity. This means sharing and learning from each other's spiritual traditions, customs and insights while working concretely together in the service of building up the kingdom of God on earth. It also means promoting a culture of interdependence as together we learn how to see the positive in the particularities of ecclesial belonging, ethnic community, history and jurisdiction that can so easily divide Christians. Being mindful of all we hold in common allows us to face more effectively those things which still divide us. An ecumenism of life entails common prayer, common witness, and common mission wherever possible, as we increasingly come to share in the life of the Holy Spirit

together. It entails sharing the ordinary aspects of our lives with each other, so that we can increasingly recognize each other as sisters and brothers in Christ, welcoming in each other the very presence of Christ.

Nothing is small if done out of love. No act of love, no simple witnessing or cooperating in Jesus' name, no coming together in prayer is without its purpose and value in responding to the Lord's desire that his disciples be one. Each such simple action quietly expresses our willingness to seek to love one another with the measure of Jesus' love, and can also speak to a world often unable to see the presence of God or indifferent to God's designs.

The ecumenical group in Ireland responsible for preparing the first draft of this year's week of prayer materials were conscious of the rich spiritual heritage of Ireland with roots in ancient Christianity, and thus shared by all Christian traditions. They were equally conscious that the Christian churches have been caught up and ensnared in the conflicts and tensions which have shaped Irish life in past centuries. There are deep wounds that have been caused or made more painful by Christian divisions.

This is now the third time over the past 25 years that the draft texts for the week of prayer have been prepared in Ireland, against the backdrop of a decreasing level of violence and an increased hope for a Christ-filled peace. Conscious of Ireland's rich but complex history, this year's source group had several reasons for choosing Mt 18:20 as the central biblical text and theme for the Week of Prayer for Christian Unity in 2006.

Firstly, they wished to draw attention to Jesus as the source of our unity, emphasising that he has already shown us the way to be instruments of the unity which God desires for us.

Secondly, while hopes often rise and fall in relation to larger gestures and initiatives for peace, the members of the source group wished to draw attention to the simplicity of two or three coming together in Christian mutual love as a vital means of building up relations between divided peoples and communities. It is often the case that small gatherings, local relations and friendships, can have a powerful impetus in creating a spirit of peace and reconciliation. Many experiences in Ireland's recent history bear witness to this.

Thirdly, the drafters were mindful that hope for the future, and peace and reconciliation in the present, necessarily involve dealing with painful memories and hurtful grievances of the past. Christian discipleship compels us to assist in finding constructive ways of dealing with past wounds and giving common witness in seeking and choosing paths leading to reconciliation. It is in that spirit that all Christians who use these week of prayer resources are encouraged to come together in prayer, and in mutual love to seek to understand each other amidst differences. We can then become ever more powerful signs of reconciliation and witnesses to the healing presence of Christ's love.

The proposed biblical texts and commentaries for the eight days are intended to evoke a sustained reflection on Jesus' invitation to gather in his name. Day 1 develops the notion that since all Christians belong to

Christ, we belong to one another, brought together in a common belonging which already shows forth in our common recognition of baptism. The second day offers a meditation on humble service (exemplified in the call to wash each other's feet) as an important means to build up the unity of the church. Day 3 reflects on the importance of praying together, raising the possibility that when Jesus prayed for his disciples to be one, it was because they were not yet united in his name; by Jesus' presence in our midst, we are bound to him and to one another. The theme of the fourth day is the healing of memories, the offering and receiving of forgiveness, as a constitutive element of rediscovering and reclaiming our unity in Christ.

The fifth day focuses on God's presence as a source of peace and stability, courage and strength, inspiring us in turn to seek the ways that make for peace. The theme of Day 6 affords us the opportunity to reflect on the dual movement of mission: of gathering in and of sending out. Both of these have the same goal of fulfilling the Father's will to strengthen the weak and to proclaim that God's kingdom has come near. The seventh day challenges us to see and welcome the neighbour and the stranger in all their otherness, seeing the presence of Christ within them as the basis for embracing and pursuing our ecumenical task. Day 8 looks forward to the end of our pilgrimage, to the fullness of Christ's presence. As we journey on, we are coming to discover fellow Christians no longer as strangers but as companions on the way, anticipating together the day when we stand side by side in the presence of Christ.