

The Week of Prayer for Christian Unity
Epiphany 3C
I Corinthians 12:12-31a

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As I mentioned at the beginning of my Thurible letter last night, I had intended on writing on the Week of Prayer for Christian Unity but my children needed me more. It may interest you to know, however, that our Bishop, Andrew Asbil, will be participating in an ecumenical service at Holy Trinity Armenian Apostolic Church in Scarborough at four o'clock this afternoon. If you won't be joining us for Zoom Evensong, I encourage you to watch that service's livestream, a link to which may be found on the diocesan website.

Whenever I think about the Week of Prayer for Christian Unity, I am reminded of how I first learned about its remarkable origins. In 2013, we had moved from Washington, DC, to Newport, Rhode Island, and I asked a colleague who was then on the staff of the Church of the Advent in Boston to serve as my confessor while I searched for a spiritual director closer to home. Newport is 115 kilometres away from Boston, under ninety minutes by car without traffic, but, as is the case in Toronto, there's *always* traffic! So the two of us looked at the map for a place to meet somewhere in between, and chanced upon the Chapel of Our Savior in Brockton, Massachusetts, about half an hour outside Boston, and under an hour away from Newport. A quick visit to their website revealed that it was operated by an order of Franciscan friars, and that it was on the grounds of a *huge* shopping mall, of all places.

I called to ask if there was a small meeting room where two Episcopal clergy could meet for the sacrament of confession on a Monday, which was our day off. The friar unhesitatingly and enthusiastically replied in the affirmative, which I have to admit sort of surprised me. I wasn't expecting a warm reception. When we arrived, we found the same cheerful fellow waiting for us. It turned out that the chapel was closed on Mondays, which we hadn't known, so we apologized for inconveniencing him. Br. Thomas waved away our contrition, and told us that the whole reason the chapel had been built in the 1960s was to provide a convenient place for people to make their confessions, since a central focus of the mission of the Franciscan Friars of the Atonement was to provide access to the Sacrament of Penance. In fact, he told us that aside from Mondays, the friars heard confessions in the chapel every day of the week, year-round, working, as their motto put it, "for the Healing, Reconciliation, and At-one-ment of All." It was as if the place was tailor-made for this meeting.

Before Br. Thomas left us to ourselves, he gave us each a copy of *Fire in the Night: The Life and Legacy of Fr. Paul of Graymoor*. From it, I learned that the Franciscan Friars (and Sisters!) of the Atonement was founded in 1898 in Graymoor, New York by Fr. Paul Wattson, an Episcopal priest, and Mother Lurana White, who had been formed by the Episcopal Sisters of the Holy Child, but later felt a call to embrace Franciscan poverty. A decade later, in 1908, Fr. Paul proposed a "Church Unity Octave," between the Feast of the Confession of St. Peter on January 18th and the Feast of the Conversion of St. Paul on January 25th.

This Church Unity Octave that began as an Anglican observance within the Episcopal Church's monastic revival was brought into the Roman Catholic Church the next year when seventeen

members of the religious order, including Father Paul and Mother Lurana, were received into the Roman Catholic Church. Mother Lurana died in 1935 at the age of sixty-five, and Fr. Paul died in 1940, on the day after Ash Wednesday, at the age of seventy-seven. Near the end of his life, Father Paul had written that the greatest undertaking of the Friars and Sisters of the Atonement was to inaugurate the Church Unity Octave.

A mere eight years after Fr. Paul's death, the World Council of Churches was founded, and since then many other Christian bodies around the world have come to celebrate the Week of Prayer for Christian Unity. Since 1968, the Faith and Order Commission of the World Council of Churches and the Pontifical Council for Promoting Christian Unity have collaborated to produce materials for use over this eight-day period. Each year a new theme is chosen. The theme for the Week of Prayer for Christian Unity in 2022 is the Epiphany, "highlighting God's invitation to all of humanity to a new covenant in the Incarnation of Christ...In the Eastern Churches, Epiphany is joined to the mystery of the Baptism of Christ, a baptism held in common as testimony to our faith in the Son of God" by all churches who participate in the World Council of Churches.¹

It's easy for us to overlook ecumenism, which seeks to bring Christians of varying confessions together in prayer and mutual understanding, and, when possible, cooperation and even union. How fitting, then, that, our epistle this morning, in the midst of Epiphanytide and the Week of Prayer for Christian Unity, is from the twelfth chapter of St. Paul's First Epistle to the Corinthians: "For just as the body is one and has many members, and all the members of the body, though many, are one body, so it is with Christ. For by one Spirit we were all baptized into one body." Paul reminds us that our unity is not grounded in who *we* are, but in who *Christ* is. Our unity derives from the fact that we are all members of the *one* Body of Christ, which is the Church.

The Church is both a universal reality and a local reality. In its universal form, it consists of the One, Holy, Catholic, and Apostolic Church we affirm in the Nicene Creed. In its local form, it consists of various congregations that share in the four credal marks of unity, holiness, catholicity, and apostolicity. And when it comes to this parish, we are members of that Church of the Nicene Creed, even though as Anglicans, we are a community shaped by the history, both glorious and ignominious, of the Church of England. When I was in the States, we called ourselves Episcopalians. And because the parishes in which I've been privileged to minister have been Anglo-Catholic churches, I consider the terms "Anglican" and "Episcopal" to be indicative not of a denomination or sect, but a particular tradition of discipleship and church order within the Universal Church. So more than being an Anglican Church, we are members of the "Nicene Church." There is no one visible Nicene Church to which we can point, which is why we must express our *belief* in the One, Holy, Catholic, and Apostolic Church in the Nicene Creed.

Of course, if you are Roman Catholic, your church teaches that all true churches "subsist" in the Roman Church, by which I understand that other churches participate to a greater or lesser degree in the One True Church. This belief is centred in and anchored by the dogma of Petrine primacy, that is, the claim that the Bishop of Rome, the Pope, as the successor of St. Peter, is the Vicar of

¹ <https://www.atonementfriars.org/announcement-of-the-week-of-prayer-for-christian-unity-2022/>

Christ on earth to whom all bishops, and ultimately all *Christians*, are rightfully subject. The Eastern Orthodox would beg to differ, of course, but their ecclesiology, that is, their theology of the nature of the church, tends either to treat the subject as if the One True Church is coterminous with the Orthodox churches taken as a whole, or a “Mystery” that, while possibly including other churches, certainly finds its fullest and best expression in Orthodoxy, which alone has maintained complete fidelity to apostolic tradition.

Anglicans, particularly those of us who describe ourselves as High Church or Anglo-Catholic, do *not* make such lofty claims when it comes to possessing the fullness of what it means to be the Church. In *The Gospel and the Catholic Church*, Michael Ramsey, who would later be consecrated as the one hundredth Archbishop of Canterbury, writes,

While the Anglican church is vindicated by its place in history, with a strikingly balanced witness to Gospel and Church and sound learning, its greater vindication lies in its pointing through its own history to something of which it is a fragment. Its credentials are its incompleteness, with the tension and the travail in its soul. It is clumsy and untidy, it baffles neatness and logic. For it is sent not to commend itself as “the best type of Christianity,” but by its very brokenness to point to the universal Church wherein all have died. (p. 220)

Archbishop Ramsey was surely inspired by St. Paul’s famous words in First Corinthians: “the body does not consist of one member but of many. If the foot should say, ‘Because I am not a hand, I do not belong to the body,’ that would not make it any less a part of the body. And if the ear should say, ‘Because I am not an eye, I do not belong to the body,’ that would not make it any less a part of the body. If the whole body were an eye, where would be the hearing? If the whole body were an ear, where would be the sense of smell? But as it is, God arranged the organs in the body, each one of them, as he chose. If all were a single organ, where would the body be? As it is, there are many parts, yet one body.”

Throughout his ministry, this decidedly Anglo-Catholic Archbishop maintained that when it comes to the church’s self-understanding, the proper attitude of *any* church of *any* stripe whatsoever, and particularly of the Anglican Church, is *humility*, not *hubris*. We are *not* the whole Body of Christ, we are only *one part* of a *greater* whole, and that Whole Church is not to be found in any *separate* church, East or West, regardless of its grandeur or, or its apostolicity, or its claims to primacy.

We find our unity with *that* [up] Body of Christ by whom, and with whom, and in whom we are given *this* [altar] Body of Christ, broken for us. Broken, and yet wonderfully unifying, as we are united with the true Head of the Church in full communion with him. In short, we *subsist* in the Real Presence of the Body of Christ.

And because we subsist in Christ, if the Anglican Church is an eye, “the eye cannot say to the hand, ‘I have no need of you,’ nor again the head to the feet, ‘I have no need of you,’ whatever other church is acting as the hand, or the head, or the feet.” I am not assigning any particular body part to this church, mind you, but metaphorically speaking, were we the eye, we should remember that it is possible for an eye to be myopic or even blinded. For each part of the Body of Christ is also a *wounded* body part. If we are an eye, we are united to *Jesus’* eyes, swollen from being beaten before he

was crucified. And in wounding each other, we continue to wound the Body of Christ, just as those soldiers mocked and beat that sacred body and upon whose head they laid a crown of thorns.

It is of *this* Body that St. Paul writes that in the Church, “the parts of the body which seem to be weaker are indispensable, and those parts of the body which we think less honourable we invest with the greater honour, and our unpresentable parts are treated with greater modesty, which our more presentable parts do not require. But God has so composed the body, giving the greater honour to the inferior part, that there may be no discord in the body, but that the members may have the same care for one another.”

Modesty for the greater parts and *honour* to the lesser parts of the Body: *this* is what we are called to embody as members of Christ’s Body, so that we can care for and serve each other and this world that God so loved that he manifested himself in the incarnate Body of Jesus.

From one perspective, the Episcopal Church and the Anglican Communion lost two great saints in the persons of Fr. Paul Wattson and Mother Lurana White when the Franciscan Friars and Sisters of the Atonement united with Rome. But we Anglicans at that time did not value the gifts these Franciscans brought to our common life, just as up to this very day, many Roman Catholics find their way to Anglicanism because the Roman Church does not value what they have to offer the Church. But unlike many people who leave one church for another, Fr. Paul and Mother Lurana were so filled with love for the Anglican Church and all other Christians that they and their community maintained the Church Unity Octave the year after they united with Rome, and in all the years following.

A mere seven years later, in 1916, Pope Benedict XV extended its observance to the whole Roman Catholic Church. And it didn’t stop there. “This new prayer effort caught the imagination of others beyond the Franciscan Friars and Sisters of the Atonement to become an energetic movement that gradually blossomed into a worldwide observance involving many nations and millions of people.”² Now known as the Week of Prayer for Christian Unity, every major Trinitarian church body in the world has adopted it and prays fervently that we might recover visible unity, so that, in the words of St. Paul, “If one member suffers, all suffer together; if one member is honoured, all rejoice together.”

This unity in suffering and brokenness is what Anglicans have to offer as we profess our faith in the One, Holy, Catholic, and Apostolic Church in the Nicene Creed, which we are about to reaffirm. No Nicene Christian can say this creed with integrity who does not pray for Christian unity. Over the next few days, how will you pray for the Church? Thankfully, the Week of Prayer for Christian Unity has easily accessible materials on the Internet, with a whole website dedicated to its observance by the churches of Canada. As we join in this Creed, think of all the millions of people around the world of many different Christian bodies who also claim it as their own, and pray that we may one day be truly one, as the Body of Christ is one, ✠ in the Name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit.

² http://fatherpaulofgraymoor.org/his_influence_today/ecumenical_and_interreligious_dialogue.html