

“Pray without Ceasing... Gathered, so as to be Scattered”
Sermon for the National Workshop on Christian Unity, Chicago, 14 April 2008
Mary Seat of Wisdom Church, Park Ridge, Ill
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INTRODUCTION

‘May the words of our mouths, the meditations of our hearts be always acceptable to you, O Lord, our rock and our redeemer’ (Ps. 19:14). Amen. I give God thanks for this opportunity to be with the church ecumenical gathered in this holy place. I give God thanks for the invitation from the workshop’s National Planning Committee and for the hospitality of Mary Seat of Wisdom Church.

A key feature of the setting which inspires this worship, the Week of Prayer for Christian Unity, is preaching, proclaiming the word of God... a very ecumenical enterprise. In Orthodox understanding preaching is speech under the authority of God. Martin Luther, the father of the Continental Reformation, understood preaching as the way the Word of God enters the hearts and minds of believers. Pioneering the Reformed movement, John Calvin saw gospel preaching as the ordinary means by which faith is communicated. Thomas Cranmer, exponent of Anglicanism, valued the homiletic as ministry understandable to the hearer. John Wesley, the founder of Methodism, sent forth his missionaries, summoning them to ‘preach so as to warm the hearts’ of their hearers. To this ecumenical array of Christian forbears, I add St. Francis of Assisi. When Francis commissioned his followers, he called them to ‘proclaim the gospel; if necessary, use words’. Well... As one ministering in an ecumenical setting, I hope this preaching bespeaks of the evangelical, gospel, fidelity of our ecumenical forbears. As one belonging to the Franciscan family, I hope to proclaim the good news of our Lord Jesus Christ... and yes, I shall use words. If you are looking for a title of this homily, let’s call it “Pray without Ceasing – Gathered, so as to be

Scattered”. If you are looking for a structure, I have three points, posed as questions:

- 1) What is this week from which we have received the theme of our workshop and our worship?
- 2) What does it mean, to ‘pray without ceasing’?
- 3) What links the three – this workshop, this annual Week of Prayer and this Pauline theme?

POINT 1, What is this week from which we have received the theme of our workshop and the theme of its opening worship?

Perhaps the best way to address the question is first to indicate what the week is not. The January Week of Prayer is not the time to split theological hairs or solve dialogical brain teasers. Those eight days are not the occasion to deliberate over conciliar ecumenism’s social agenda in light of the church, its faith and its unity. Then was not the period to study such achievements as the Augsburg accord of 1999, which celebrates Lutheran-Catholic consensus on the doctrine of justification and the relationship of God’s grace and human good works, let alone the time to consider what implications the accord might have in the future for other Christian traditions, as it has for Methodists having signed with Lutherans and Catholics an association document on justification. Then was not the hour to heal the moral dis-ease festering in our churches and in our societies; or to reconcile a prosperity gospel with a beatitude gospel. Not then do we address the reality that arguments over homosexuality take place not only among the churches but within each of our churches. Nor was the octave the opportunity for Christians to entertain their place in the wider scene of interreligious affairs with Jews, Muslims, Hindus, Buddhists, Sikhs and those of other

living faiths. Neither was it the time to wonder why, so it seems, the Christian agenda of unity has been surpassed by the interfaith agenda of eco-human well-being. That week is not the moment to exhaust our energies in the busyness of cooperative ventures of social work and relief services. We engage in such important tasks outside the Week of Prayer for Christian Unity – here and now, during the National Workshop on Christian Unity, and when we leave this place, inserting the ecumenical dimension in our ministries at home.

That Week of Prayer, which inspires so much of what ecumenists do day in day out, what we are doing during these workshop days, has a long history. Traces are found in a prayer movement begun in the 1800s among Evangelicals and Pentecostals. They observed a week of prayer, interceding for Christians of ‘mainline churches’ – churches of the classical Reformation (Lutheran, Reformed), the English Reformation (Anglican, Methodist), the Roman Catholic Church and the Orthodox churches – some of which those praying did not consider ‘Christian’. Another initiative is that of Graymoor. You know our story. In 1899 Father Paul Wattson and Mother Lurana White formed an Anglican religious community with the charism to live, pray and minister so ‘that all may be one, ... that the world may believe...’ (Jn 17:21). In 1908 Father Paul set aside the week from the feast of the Confession (or Chair) of St. Peter (January 18) to the Conversion of St. Paul (January 25) as an octave of prayer – for the reconciliation of Protestants, Anglicans and Orthodox with Rome, and for the conversion to Christianity of Non-Christians. Then in the 1930s in Lyon, France Fr. Paul Couturier nuanced and expanded the Graymoor vision to a universal Week of Prayer for Christian Unity, seeking the unity among Christians ‘as Christ wills and when Christ wills’. This year marks the centenary celebration of the first octave observance of prayer for Christian unity, which was held by the Society of the Atonement, at Graymoor, Garrison, New York in 1908. One

hundred years!

So, what is this week, so richly framed by two saints, whose names bear the symbol of the foundation of Christian faith and the establishment of this faith among the nations? I dare say the Reformers and Francis – not to mention the ‘two Pauls’, Father Wattson and Abbé Couturier – had much in common with St. Peter and St. Paul. The week is a moment of Christian prayer, an ecumenical retreat if you like, when Christians of all traditions recourse to a common spiritual exercise. Ponder for a moment the week’s title – Week of Prayer for Christian Unity. It is not a ‘week of unity’ – we’re not there yet, and that is why we are here in workshop this week. Rather, it is a week of prayer for unity. Moreover, its focus is not only that Christians pray for each other, but also with each other. Together we gather, in the name of Jesus, in adoration, praise, thanksgiving and supplication, before our Father who, by the power of their Holy Spirit, is ever present to us. We express our gratitude for the God-given gift of the unity of the church. And then we scatter, receiving as our own the human call to manifest that unity in a full and visible way. We do this best by doing what is ecumenically possible, not what is ecumenically impossible. A common baptism draws us together. Possible is proclaiming and hearing God’s holy word, sharing it in such a way that its eternal message may break open upon our temporal meaning. But our baptismal koinonia has yet to be fulfilled in eucharistic fellowship. Impossible is celebrating that word around a common eucharistic table. So, with faith-filled hope that the day will come when there is also bread and wine to share, we turn to scripture and our unity found there.

POINT 2, What does it mean, to ‘pray without ceasing’?

We have just heard proclaimed the scriptural word which also nurtured us during the January

octave. It is a passage passed on to us from the joint planning committee of the World Council of Churches and the Pontifical Council for Promoting Christian Unity. “Be at peace... admonish... encourage... help... be patient... do good to all... rejoice always... pray without ceasing... give thanks in all circumstances...” So Paul exhorts the church in Thessalonika around the year 50 CE and the church in Chicago in 2008. Or does he?

This passage is not about us. It can't be. How can we do all those things? Peace? We Christians engage in war, including war against one another. Action? We Christians are the idlers... the faint-hearted... the weak... Pray unceasingly? Most of us are ‘do-ers’ more than ‘be-ers’. Surely well-intended, we try to convince ourselves and God that all we do is prayer – our work, our study, our ‘faith & order and our life & work’, even our play.

Not so, and as a result... We Christians domesticate the gospel. We compromise unity. We acculturate Jesus Christ. We sanitise the cross. We socialise and politicise the one church of the Lord in our many churches. We accommodate ecclesial mission. This is sin, and it is sin that crucifies Jesus. It would do our churches well to examine their corporate conscience regarding such domestication, compromise, acculturation, sanitisation, socialisation, politicisation, accommodation. Unable to see our faith as the victory that overcomes the ‘world’ (1 John 5:4) – the ‘world’, all sin and evil, including that of a divided Christendom –, we crucify Jesus. Unable to see Christian disunity as sin, we crucify Jesus. Unable to see that what unites us in faith, life and witness, is greater than what divides us, we crucify Jesus. Christian disunity crucifies Jesus. It pulls at our ecumenical hearts that we can't do all the things Paul seemingly expects. Neither could the Thessalonians, who also at times missed the point.

But the passage is not about us or them. It is about God. Yes, Christian disunity breaks our

hearts. But our hearts are healed because they reside in the heart of God. We are God's beloved. In him we can be at peace with one another. In him we can rejoice. In him we can do all these things – admonish the idlers, encourage the faint-hearted, help the weak, be patient with all, not repay with evil – because we see them for what they are, opportunities which invite God to be God in our lives, in our churches. And so, yes, we can... rejoice always and give thanks in all circumstances – only in him, because it is he who prays without ceasing within us. It is this presence that bears Christian unity and human community. Praying unceasingly refers to our God. Unceasingly, we celebrate our belief that the Father gave us the Son filled with their Holy Spirit. This God welcomes us to share in his unity by being one with each other in the proclamation of faith, in the celebration of sacrament, in the action of mission. Already, but not yet.

So understood, our passage becomes an examination of conscience. To pray without ceasing means to cease all else and take time for prayer – daily, weekly, monthly, yearly / meditation, liturgy, recollection, retreat – as Jesus did. How faithful am I/are you to this vocation of which Paul reminds us? What blessed assurance do I/you have that we are pointing to the One who is the Way rather than getting in his way? What refreshment from the Source still flows from my/your baptism? What is my/your stewardship in the church, which has been entrusted to be the continuing presence of Christ in the world?

POINT 3, What links the three – the January Week of Prayer, the Pauline theme and our workshop?

The Week of Prayer for Christian Unity is to the ecumenical calendar as Holy Week is to the liturgical calendar. Aside from parallels – for example, the John 17 'unity passage' which inspires the Week of Prayer is read during Holy Week; and baptism, administered at Easter, is the

sacramental warrant of the real yet imperfect unity which Christians already share – aside from these, a more fundamental connection exists between the two weeks. Holy Week is not ‘Holy’ because it stands above every other week in the church year. It is holy because every week in the life of the faithful is holy. Its climax, Easter, is important not because all other Sundays in the year are ‘little Easters’. Easter is important because it is the ‘big Sunday’ – on which the paschal mystery is remembered in fullness. (Come the day when Christian West and Christian East may celebrate it together). The Week of Prayer for Christian Unity is not important because it stands apart from every other week in the ecumenical agenda. The Week of Prayer is important because it touches the soul of the ecumenical movement, spirituality. Just as every Sunday is Easter, every week of the year is a unity prayer week. Just as we live the paschal mystery of the Lord Jesus Christ until he comes again in glory, we live in Christian holiness, in service to the church of God and to the world God so loves. We gather in his name so as also to be scattered. We gather in his name – in church, as the assembly of word and sacrament. We gather in his name – at home, as the ‘domestic church’. The Lord’s presence to us when we gather then goes with us when we scatter as the ‘mission church’. We scatter in his name – from home to the job, to school, at play, on holiday, in community service. Work, study, running errands, enjoying recreation, doing sports, going on crop walks, providing Christian aid and relief services, promoting justice and peace. Such is The Great Commission – Christian and ecumenical. How are we doing in a conscience and consciousness examen?

Gathering during times such as the holy Week of Prayer for Christian Unity nurtures our scattering to fields ecumenical, to Chicago. A heart-warming opportunity when applied to what one ecumenical forbear, John Wesley, described as the Christian call, to do ‘all the good you can, by all

the means you can, in all the ways you can, in all the places you can, at all the times you can, to all the people you can, as long as ever you can' – now, here in Chicago. A heart-rendering challenge when applied to St. Francis' mandate, to embrace a 'hermitage-piazza lifestyle', as mendicants, itinerant disciples, going back and forth from solitude to marketplace, to image God's presence by being present – now here in Chicago. All is possible, as we take to heart Paul's meaning of 'pray without ceasing'.

Gathered, may the word of God, which comes to us in each day's prayer, draw us closer to the day when Christians can together break bread and further shape common witness. Scattered, let us go forth and warm the hearts of people, witnessing – with and without words – the Lord's good news. Such is the mission of all who call themselves Christian and the imperative of their churches' dialogue and cooperation. Let us each, in God's peace and good, discern the ecumenical dimension of personal Christian experience and do the ecumenically possible in our life, prayer and ministry. "We appeal to you, brothers and sisters... for this is the will of God in Christ Jesus for you". So exhorts St. Paul in his letter. Amen.