

REFLECTION FOR FRIDAY AM CCC WORSHIP - COMMEM. 50th anniversary of Vatican II's Decree On Ecumenism (Fr Cyprian Hutcheon)

Passage: Ephesians 4: 1-6

Dear Sisters and Brothers in Christ -

The text just read is commonly used on ecumenical occasions to highlight and characterize the unity that we as Christians already share in our diversity.

It finds echoes, for example, in the stirring words of the popular 19th century hymn, "Onward, Christian Soldiers" where we sing with considerable bravado: "We are not divided, all one body we; one in hope and doctrine, one in charity!"

BUT - not meaning to rain on anyone's parade - let's look more closely for a moment at St Paul's "marks of the Church" to see whether they correspond to the realities we inhabit as divided Christians within the ecumenical family.

Right off, let me quibble with three of St Paul's characterizations. He describes Christians as comprising "One Body". Even though we may glimpse and even taste this reality when we are gathered together in assemblies such as this one, the day to day reality is self-evidently otherwise. Especially for those of us who embrace the small 'c' catholic insistence that the church is a visible, physical entity and not just a virtual, spiritual one, we are forced to acknowledge that we are most definitely NOT YET one.

Likewise, with Paul's description of Christians as sharing "One Faith". While it is true that we do hold many beliefs in common in matters of faith, especially when we are faced by an unsympathetic or even hostile world, deeper reflection obliges us to acknowledge that the faith we hold is not unified. To give but one example, the Nicene Creed speaks of belief in One, Holy, Catholic and Apostolic Church which means very different things to an Orthodox and a Baptist engaging in dialogue.

But at least, you may argue, we can acknowledge that as Christians, having all been baptized, we are united in that "One Baptism" of which Paul speaks. Unfortunately, not even this holds us together. Certain of our members - for example, the Salvation Army and the Religious Society of Friends, the Quakers - do not practise water baptism, but rather interpret New Testament talk of "Baptism" in spiritual terms. In my own Eastern Orthodox tradition, there are some on the right wing of our internal spectrum who would deny that valid baptism is administered anywhere outside the visible boundaries of the Orthodox Church.

So what CAN we, gathered here to celebrate the CCC's 70th birthday, - what CAN we identify as that which holds us together? Let me suggest - and here I feel St Paul is dead on - that what we share is our common EXPERIENCE of God-in-Trinity.

Many people, including nowadays many Christians - influenced it might seem by the "Dan Brown School of theology" - are (unfortunately in my opinion) ready to dismiss the whole idea of "Trinity" as just so much theological mumbo-jumbo from the 4th century.

But let us be reminded that there was an EXPERIENCE of God-in-Trinity long before the dogma was formulated. [In fact it could be argued that the dogma was intended to protect the integrity of the experience for later Xian generations]. The Trinitarian experience is clearly discernible in the pages of

the New Testament itself, and it is that to which St Paul testifies in the Ephesians passage that was read a moment ago. It is this experience, I would argue, that constitutes the bond of unity that already unites us imperfectly.

We ALL claim to follow Jesus of Nazareth, our One Lord, "the Christ, the Son of the Living God", the "Man for others", the "Human Face of God" (to use two of his more contemporary titles). We have committed our lives to him, and to the advancement of his kingdom, while longing to become healed and complete human persons, re-fashioned in his Image. Through him and with him and in him, we are brought to God, his Father, who is the "One God and Father of us all, who is above all and through all and in all" (to quote St. Paul). We are moved in our hearts to follow the One Lord in his ascent to the One God and Father by the power and inner promptings of the One Spirit who unites us in "the bond of peace."

To the extent that each one of us, individually and collectively, remains true to our experiences of God-in-Trinity, we shall be drawn into that wonderful "circle dance" of love that unites Father, Son and Spirit, being drawn at the same time towards an ever more complete and perfect unity with one another. May God grant this! Amen