Homily for the Week of Prayer for Christian Unity: “They showed us unusual kindness”

Fr. Don Rooney

Hospitality is where it all begins, isn’t it? Three strangers suddenly come to Abraham and Sarah’s house, at this point very advanced in years. Abraham immediately greets them and makes them feel welcome, and they prepare a meal for the visitors. By this hospitality the fulfillment of the already-promised descendants and lands is made known, as one of the three informs Sarah she will have a child within a year’s time, because nothing is too marvelous for the LORD to do.

All of us claim as our common identity and corporate history the incarnation of the Son of God when, in Jesus Christ, divinity and humanity are found in one person, both human and divine. The calendar in the West started over with his birth. It is in his name we gather to give glory to the Father, and he is present to us when we gather. It is by his spirit we are sent to the world to proclaim the Good News that there is more to life than what we can only see and touch on this earth. We are called to more than we can possibly imagine.

It is as his body we are called to act as he acts, to welcome as he welcomes. To give, to love and welcome all unconditionally as Jesus does. Hospitality to strangers, hospitality to foreigners, hospitality to foes, even to those who do not agree with us. Hospitality within our churches, between our churches.

To not live hospitality is to deny the possibility that dialogue can transform us.

In 1054, Western civilization was emerging from the darkness into new forms of art and technology. This time of rapid growth in cultural expression highlighted a rich diversity, but the Church was now faced with the impossible task of bridging empires – East to West, a new, deep, unprecedented division rooted in a struggle of power and authority. Orthodox and Catholic faithful would not speak for centuries.

Then, 500 years later, 1517. Humanism and the Renaissance clashed with the ideology of Christianity. Two years ago we observed the very important 500th anniversary of the Reformation, and in many gatherings we admitted that what was a perfect storm of egos, corruption and intellectual power replaced a dialogue of ideas with ideologues, personalities whose lack of humility did not allow for dialogue. There was no spirit of hospitality.

Now, 2000. I propose to you the new crossroads where we find ourselves is a world which is intrinsically post-Christian, even anti-Christian. It goes way beyond differing opinions or polarization based on the clash of liberal and conservative. Rather than the humanism of the Renaissance it is a depersonalization which we are experiencing with the unprecedented rise of information technology and the replacement of community by
virtual individualism. For nearly 2000 years the Church had the role of defining the human person, one's life and work according to their relationship with God -- which is now being replaced by a growing acceptance of nothingness. We don’t know who we are anymore. What hope of hospitality is there in a depersonalized world?

It is a world where 12-year-olds are somehow confident enough to decide that 2000 years of grace, and Tradition, and religious practice are not important. In a country uniquely founded on religious freedom, the new freedom is to practice nothing. Those who practice religion are often considered suspect, strange, or weak. Our communities should be speaking together about this.

It is possible to say that centuries of bloodshed in the name of religion gave birth to later generations of people who decided it might be more virtuous to be nonreligious, if that is what religious looks like.

Perhaps this is the most fundamental dialogue of all: at the end of the day what is it that keeps us going as individual churches? Why do we bother to get together to seek a dialogue with one another? Is it because we are going to discover some startling new truth that we have been overlooking all these years as followers of Christ? Is some new revelation expected? Or is our goal the dialogue itself? To get to know you, and to be known, and to find that at the heart of us is Christ, whom we really seek? To welcome you as Christ, and to welcome you as Christ welcomes.

For our confirmation sacramental program here at Saint Bernadette we form small groups out of all those to be confirmed. Our confirmandi no longer do service hours as a hoop to jump through. Rather, they do corporal and spiritual works of mercy: to feed the hungry, clothe the naked, visit the sick, bury the dead, instruct, counsel, pray. They learn what the Church is by being the Church. At the end of the year, we do a theological reflection, but we don’t call it that. The eighth graders eyes just glaze over! I simply ask, “Who did you serve?” Nobody remembers anyone’s names, of course, but eventually you see the light coming on as the thought forms: It was Jesus we served in them. “And who did they encounter in you?” It was Jesus.

Can such a simple ecclesiology be true? That Church happens when it is Christ who serves, and Christ who is served? It is we who offer our hearts to the Father as Christ, and the Father who gives us Christ in our hearts and homes? And is not the foundation of such a theology of the Church the hospitality that allows for the possibility of Christ to be?

Might hospitality be the open door through which the Holy Spirit can come among us and reconcile us first as friends and unite us as one people to God?

In the Catholic Church, the Second Vatican Council (1962-1965) had at the core of its work the task of how to define the role of the Church in and her relationship with the modern world, her relevance as God’s people and relationships with other churches and world religions. She simply could no longer live as if no one else mattered. Finally
without any political or temporal power, we as the Church must live the faith we profess, live mercy, service, compassion, charity. Not to live division, but to live hospitality.

There have been moments in these past nearly 60 years that people were so filled with hope that this ecumenical experiment might be brought to fulfillment. One of them was right at the end of the Second Vatican Council, when Pope St. Paul VI and Patriarch Athenagoras I proclaimed at the same time from Rome and Istanbul that the mutual excommunications of 1054 were made in error, and lifted. “They regret the offensive words, the reproaches without foundation, the reprehensible gestures which, on both sides, have marked or accompanied the sad events of this period. They likewise regret and remove both from memory and from the midst of the Church the sentences of excommunication which followed these events, the memory of which has influenced actions up to our day and has hindered closer relations in charity; and they commit these excommunications to oblivion.”¹ Here is hopeful hospitality, which allowed fruitful dialogue and reconciling actions to flourish both within the Pan-Orthodox conferences and between East and West.

“They recognize that the true dialogue of charity, which should be at the basis of all relations between themselves and between their Churches, must be rooted in total fidelity to the one Lord Jesus Christ and in mutual respect for each one’s traditions. Every element which can strengthen the bonds of charity, of communion, and of common action is a cause for spiritual rejoicing and should be promoted; anything which can harm this charity, communion and common action is to be eliminated with the grace of God and the creative strength of the Holy Spirit.”²

Put simply, if what we do is of Jesus, it will unite. If it is not, it will not. Regarding the first great schism, we must ask why we are still divided.

Many believe that another peak moment in the work of ecumenism came with the proclamation of the Joint Declaration on the Doctrine of Justification by the Lutheran World Federation and the Vatican’s Pontifical Council for the Promotion of Christian Unity in 1999. It is a sober looking back to the beginning of many divisions in 1517 and the Reformation to consider more than just the reechoing partisan soundbites that oversimplified the reality for the next 500 years. Might people have been saying the same things, though differently? What social and political stressors influenced the impossibility of hospitality? What sort of diversity in schools of theology existed at the time which makes our looking backward less certain?

1999 was a moment when Lutherans and Catholics sat down together with the hospitality which allowed the conversation to finally take place, free from anything that is not Christ. It was a similar “Vatican II” moment, not fighting over who is more like Christ, but seeking Christ in us.

¹ Joint Catholic-Orthodox Declaration of His Holiness Pope Paul VI and the Ecumenical Patriarch Athenagoras I, 7 December 1965
² Common Declaration of His Holiness Pope Paul VI and the Ecumenical Patriarch Athenagoras I, 28 October 1967
“Opposing interpretations and applications of the biblical message of justification were in the sixteenth century a principal cause of the division of the Western church and led as well to doctrinal condemnations. A common understanding of justification is therefore fundamental and indispensable to overcoming that division. By appropriating insights of recent biblical studies and drawing on modern investigations of the history of theology and dogma, the post-Vatican II ecumenical dialogue has led to a notable convergence concerning justification, with the result that this Joint Declaration is able to formulate a consensus on basic truths concerning the doctrine of justification. In light of this consensus, the corresponding doctrinal condemnations of the sixteenth century do not apply to today's partner.”

“Thus the doctrinal condemnations of the 16th century, in so far as they relate to the doctrine of justification, appear in a new light: The teaching of the Lutheran churches presented in this Declaration does not fall under the condemnations from the Council of Trent. The condemnations in the Lutheran Confessions do not apply to the teaching of the Roman Catholic Church presented in this Declaration.”

May the healing begin in the way we approach one another. The document is significant not only for Lutherans and Catholics, but has also been cosigned by the United Methodist Church (2006), welcomed and affirmed by the Anglican-Roman Catholic International Commission (ARCIC) in “Salvation and the Church” (2016) and by the World Communion of Reformed Churches (Congregational, Presbyterian, Reformed, United, Uniting and Waldensian Churches (2017).

The Joint Declaration is the new starting point for going forward in ecumenical dialogue and consensus, finding the path to discuss the other issues at hand with hearts of hospitality: the relationship between the Word of God and Church doctrine, ecclesial authority, church unity, ministry, and sacraments. We must go forward in the knowledge that division and avoiding dialogue are not according to the will of God, and therefore willful, persistent sin.

And, after the work is done, hopefully we will ask, “Who did we encounter in dialogue?” May the reply be “Jesus.” And who did you encounter in me? I pray that it will always be Jesus.

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3 The Joint Declaration on the Doctrine of Justification, paragraph 13
4 Ibid., paragraph 41