

3rd Sunday in Ordinary Time (B)
(Week of Prayer for Christian Unity)
Jonah 3:1-5.10 / Mark 1:14-20
24.01.2021

On this day the word of God calls us to repent. The invitation to repentance is one that runs throughout the Scriptures; it is central to both Old and New Testaments. While the fact that we hear this call during the Week of Prayer for Christian Unity is, to some extent, a pure coincidence, I actually consider it to be quite providential.

Looking at this morning's Scripture texts, with the exhortation to repentance central to both of them, I found myself thinking of how Pope John-Paul II made such a strong link between the call to repent and the Church's engagement on the path to unity. We could say that his magisterium paired the Church's whole ecumenical endeavour with the Gospel's exhortation to repentance. This theme was a constant in his teaching. It was especially prevalent in his writings and catechesis around the Great Jubilee Year, 2000. One thinks of the memorable *Public Act* in which he led the Catholic Church that year, marking entry into the Lenten season at the Vatican with a Solemn Liturgy of Repentance. That was a truly prophetic gesture – one whose significance still resounds; one which will be remembered as a landmark event in Church history.

In his famous groundbreaking Encyclical *Ut Unum Sint*, John-Paul II very courageously insisted upon the Church's need to repent if we are to know Christian unity. *The Church is called to continual reform*, he wrote. He spoke of the need for *a review and even a reverse of certain assertions and attitudes; the humble recognition of having gotten things wrong and repenting of that*. In *Ut Unum Sint* the saintly pope called for *a change of language and of attitudes*. He stressed how *we should avoid aggression and antagonism in the way we articulate our thought*. He spoke of *the necessity of avoiding the aggressive and antagonistic approach of opposition*. He put us on our guard against *the tendency to say everything in negative terms to the point of resorting to an unequivocal insistence upon ourselves being right and others wrong*. He warned against *condemning the other side out of disdain, born of an unhealthy perception of difference*. In *Ut Unum Sint* we read that *it is necessary to do everything possible with God's help to break down the walls of division and distrust; to overcome obstacles and prejudices*. He spelt out what he was saying by explaining this means *avoiding hurtful words and expressions*. Above all, he wrote, *the effort to arrive at Christian Unity entails choosing the path of humility, meekness and fraternal generosity*.

Although it may seem of little importance to us today, a big step was made by the Catholic Church when it stopped talking of other Christians as *heretics* or *enemies of the faith*. Aware of this shift, in *Ut Unum Sint*, Pope John-Paul II hailed what he called *the purification and the broadening of our vocabulary*; seeing it as indicative of *a significant change of attitude*. He spoke of it as *the fruit of a journey of conversion*. Furthermore, he insisted, *the call to conversion addressed to all Christians passes along a necessary path of mutual repentance for wrongs committed*.

Pope-John II did not hold back from asking for forgiveness for the faults committed by members of the Catholic Church. There were those who would claim that Pope John-Paul II initiated something quite original here. Some criticised him quite openly for breaking with Catholic tradition on this point. As is so often the case when people clamour for respect for Catholic tradition, his opponents manifested that they actually ignored much of true Catholic tradition. Without in any way denying the great significance of a modern day pope taking the

steps he did, speaking the words he spoke, posing the gestures he posed, it is important for us to remember that already in the Patristic era (the formative years of great Catholic tradition) there were those who spoke as he did, insisting upon the necessity of repentance and reconciliation in the Church. I think of what St Cyprian declared in his teaching when he taught that *estranged brothers must learn to go to the altar reconciled because God does not accept the sacrifice of a sower of disunion. Instead, the better sacrifice to offer God is peace, brotherly concord and a people made one in the unity of the Father, Son and Holy Spirit.* Cyprian was evidently chastising those who in his day had mounted on their high horse and were unwilling to adopt the attitudes which Pope John-Paul called forth from the Church more recently. Pope John-Paul II stood in line and in solidarity with St Cyprian when he spoke of the call addressed to the Church in our age being to *adopt a spirit of humility, meekness and fraternal generosity in our dealings with each other in the One Family of God.* Aware of St Cyprian's words, Pope John-Paul II echoed the exhortation of that great doctor of the Church when he said that *we should ask the Lord for the grace needed to bring us to the point of offering the sacrifice of unity together.*

Encouraging the Church to prepare for entry into the present millennium. Pope John-Paul II said that *the Church could not cross the threshold of this millennium without repentance and purification... the recognition of and repentance from past errors and instances of infidelity, inconsistency and slowness to act.* In *Novo Millennio Inuente* he spoke specifically of *sins against Christian unity, with the intolerance and violence that had been resorted to by those who thought of themselves as defenders of the truth.*

In passing, I have to say that the Church is still suffering today from what Pope John-Paul II outlined in his Letter to prepare the new millennium: *instances of infidelity, inconsistency and slowness to act.* This is the case in many other domains than those which have contributed to disunity among Christians and have slowed down efforts to arrive at ecclesial communion. I say that with a heavy heart thinking of the Churches' part in what has been revealed in the recent publication of the Report into Mothers and Babies Homes in Ireland. Understandably, there have been legitimate criticisms of John-Paul's own failure to see the painful reality with which so many were grappling during his pontificate as victims of clerical sex abuse... and this around the very time he penned or spoke the prophetic words he pronounced in regard to the need for efforts in the domain of growth in Christian unity. Whatever failures there were in other domains, it stands that Pope John-Paul II's insights around Christian unity, and the ways he promoted to arrive at that end, are and will remain for generations to come a very significant contribution that we must sustain and try to build upon.

Of course, John-Paul II was not the only saint of unity in modern times to have served as Bishop of Rome. The saintly popes John XXIII and Paul VI both paved a way before John-Paul II. His two successors, in their turn, have both pursued the path John-Paul II traced before them. Pope Francis' contributions to growth in Christian unity have been particularly significant. Of all the Roman Pontiffs, he has sought to speak with one voice along other leaders of the other Churches on diverse issues of common concern, understanding that what is said together has a more striking impact upon our world than a word spoken by one Church alone would ever have.

To come back to the contribution of John-Paul II to the cause of Christian unity. Recently I came across extracts from a memorandum he wrote for the Consistory of 1994 – this text which was made available to the Cardinals of that Consistory came into the public domain through quotations from it found here and there. In it, John-Paul II stated that *the Church*

needs to engage in an attentive examination of conscience in order to acknowledge the errors committed by her members and, in a certain sense, in the name of the Church. (For anyone who knows how the Church thinks and operates, that was and remains a very significant statement. If the Church sometimes speaks of *the sin of her members*, it is always hesitant about admitting to any error on the Church's behalf! Usually, it just doesn't do that!) John-Paul II went on to write: *The Church should be aware with greater clarity of how much the faithful have proven to be unfaithful throughout the centuries, sinning against Christ and His Gospel.* While this Consistory document was circulated in 1994 (it would appear written by the Pope's own hand), it has to be said that the idea of acknowledging the faults of members of the Church, and especially persons acting officially in the name of the Church, was already there soon after John-Paul II's election as Bishop of Rome in 1978. (Think of the Galileo affair!) John-Paul II was convinced that only the acknowledgement of faults and/or of omissions would ever provide the platform required for what he saw his whole mission to be about: the new evangelisation! Only repentance would open up a way for the reception of the Gospel afresh. Only repentance would open up the path to unity... upon which the credibility of the Gospel depends, according to Jesus' own prayer in John 17, wherein He pleads with the Father: *May they all be one so that the world may be led to believe in the Gospel you sent me to preach.* John-Paul's particular spiritual intuition was rooted in his reading and understanding of the Gospels – including passages like that which we heard read today with its call: *Repent and believe in the Gospel, for the kingdom of heaven is close at hand.*

The Church is the community of sinners redeemed. It is marred by the sin of her members to the extent that she herself is tainted by them. The great ecclesiologist, the late Cardinal Avery Dulles, S.J., reminds us that: *Evil committed by Christians, especially if they are frequent or habitual and are done in the name of the Church, are very damaging to the Church's mission.* While some would argue that to admit to the Church's sins and errors (that of her members, at least) is dangerous and can be a cause of scandal, I think we have seen, in so much of what has come to light in regard to past cover-up in vain bids to avoid scandal, not to admit to sins and errors is even more damaging in the long run. Sincere repentance is always precisely what is needed to remove the sources of scandal wont to arise among us, given the weakness of fallen humanity. Sincere repentance, admission of guilt, if not by commission, at least by omission, is what is needed to heal wounded memories and quench smouldering resentments that linger as long as they are not acknowledged and tended to. As long as wrongs committed in the past are ignored, or relegated to the unspoken, by those who represent the Church today, they will continue to raise their voices and cry out to make themselves heard. It is as we repent, personally and collectively, that we are led to grow in deeper union with the Lord and with each other... and that healing can begin to take place, purifying and pacifying gaping wounds.

In light of what we have heard today, let us open our hearts to the Gospel with its call to repent. In the context of this Week of Prayer for Christian Unity, let us seek to apply acknowledgement of our wrongs and errors of the past and a commitment to repent of them in this day and age to the whole domain of our ecumenical relations with fellow-Christians.

Amen!