

CHRITIAN UNITY

HIS HOLINESS POPE SHENOUDA III

A speech given by His Holiness Pope Shenouda III, Pope of Alexandria and Patriarch of the See of St. Mark the Apostle in the International Week of Prayer for Christian Unity, held in St. Mark's Coptic Cathedral in Cairo 1974.

In the Name of the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit, One God. AMEN

We thank our Lord and Master Jesus Christ who has granted us this opportunity to gather in church to pray for its Unity and solidarity, and for us to become one in Him.

Christian Unity Is God's Will

“So there shall be one Flock and one Shepherd” (John 10:16). In His last prayer in Gethsemane, Our Lord said: “They may all be one, even as you Father, are in me, and I in you that they also may be in us. So that the world may believe that you have sent me.” (John 17:21-24).

What does that mean?

It means that Christian Unity is essential for Faith and Evangelism. The mere existence of so many Christian divisions and factions is the greatest stumbling block to the rest of the world. How could they believe while the truth appears lost amidst controversy and contradiction between various churches?

“They may be one . . . So that the World may believe . . .” and listen to that Comparison and what a Comparison it is!: “They may be one even as we are one” (John 17:22) On his way to Golgotha, the Lord's sole concern was the Church's Unity. He had given a Commandment and a prayer to His disciples. The Commandment is: “To love one another as I have loved you. Greater love has no man than this, that a man lay down his life for his friends” (John 15:13) and the Prayer is that: “they may be one even as we are one”.

Church Unity is a Natural State

We all know that the Church is the Body of Christ. Christ has one body. He is the head, we all are the body. It cannot be such a mutilated Body. The Church is Christ's

bride. Christ has one bride . . . one Church. "I am the Vine, you are the branches" (John 15:5) One vine: One church: We all are branches.

Church Unity Is An Ecclesiastical Fact

In the creed we say: "Truly we believe in One, Holy, Universal and Apostolic Church." Therefore, One Church it must be; it gathers all; and it is Holy.

If we say many churches, we would have broken our Creed. The plural word "churches" is mentioned in the Bible in a geographical sense only. So, it is one Church, no matter where it exists.

Church Unity Is An Historical Inheritance

". . . those who believed were of one heart and soul" (Acts 4:32) We also find lots of delightful expressions about this "One Church" in St. Paul's plea for Unity in his Epistle to the Ephesians:

"I therefore, a prisoner for the Lord, beg you to lead a life worthy of the calling to which you have been called, with all lowliness and meekness, with patience, for bearing one another in Love, eager to maintain the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace. There is one body and one Spirit just as you were called to the one hope that belongs to your call, one God and Father of us all, who is above all and through all and in all" (Ephesians 4:1-6)

Christianity started as one Apostolic Church in Jerusalem, and it will end also as one Church in the Eternal everlasting life, gathering not only all those who believed but also the angels . . . in the Heavenly Jerusalem.

Unity Is Love

If we are divided, then we don't love one another . . . "this is my Commandment, that you love one another as I have loved you" (John 15:12). If we have this kind of love, the whole world will see Christ in us. "God is Love, and he who abides in Love abides in God and God abides in him" (John 4:16).

Let us love one another first, then in an atmosphere of love we can discuss theological matters. Divisions in the Christian world happened not because of theological differences but because we abandoned the love we had in the beginning. Every church looked for the others' faults. Theologians studying the nature of Christ, which is full of Love and peace, became divided and excommunicated one another.

Would that we loved one another without arguments about matters that we know we cannot fully comprehend.

St. Paul says: "I could not address you as spiritual men . . . there is jealousy and strife among you, are you not of the flesh and behaving like ordinary men?" (1 Corinthians 3:1-3). Unity is Love. We don't have to compromise the faith, but with Love, discuss it and reach Unity.

Unity Is Strength

Divisions have weakened our Universal Apostolic Church. Christians united with Love can be compared with bricks united in one building; one Church.

Christianity nowadays confronts waves of atheism, materialism and permissiveness which could destroy the world. The modern world does not favour an Orthodox, Protestant or Catholic approach to life. All could be lost. Christian Unity will give the Church strength and solidarity against the permissiveness, materialism and unbelief of our time.

Unity Is Humility

We cannot reach Unity unless we humble ourselves. Without humility we could, wasting time, be busy finding who is going to be the head of a united church and which Church is going to lead the rest. When the disciples had these thoughts, our Lord said to them:

“It shall not be so among you, but whoever would be great among you must be your servant and whoever would be first among you must be your slave; even as the Son of Man came not to be served but to serve, and to give His life as a ransom for many” (Matthew 20:26-28).

St. Paul addresses us saying: “Complete my joy by being of the same mind, having the same love, being in full accord and of one mind. Do nothing from selfishness or conceit but in humility count others better than yourselves. Let each of you look not only to his own interests but also to the interests of others.” Then he reminds us of the ultimate humility in Christ Himself adding: “Have this mind among yourselves which is yours in Christ Jesus, who, though He was in the form of God, did not count equality with God a thing to be grasped, but ***emptied Himself taking the form of a servant***, being born in the likeness of men. And being found in human form He humbled Himself and became obedient unto death, even death on a Cross.” (Philippians 2:2-8).

If we are seeking Christian Unity, then let us have such Christlike humility.

Unity Is The Work Of The Holy Spirit

We - Dear Brethren in Christ - have not yet reached this Unity but we are praying for it now. We believe that Church Unity is the work of the Holy Spirit and the result of God's intervention in His Church. Don't think that Unity can be achieved merely by our strength or our knowledge of the Bible. It cannot be achieved by our wit or theological ability. “Unless the Lord builds the House, those who build it labour in vain” (Psalm 127:1). Unless the Lord unites the Church, Ecumenical Conferences and Theological Meetings will be held in vain.

Let us pray that God intervenes and pours out upon our hearts His love and humility, so that when we open our mouths, we speak His word.

We have met to pray to God, to pray that the Lord fulfills what He promised His Church; one Flock, one Shepherd. We pray that the Church may live invested by His peace and security.

Some could ask: What steps have you taken on the Road to Church Unity and what results have you reached?

The Coptic Orthodox Church has taken part in all Theological Conferences that have been held for Church Unity. We met with the Uniate Orthodox and with Byzantine, Chalcedonian Churches including the Orthodox of Russia, Romania, Bulgaria, Greece and Constantinople. We met the Roman Catholics in their conferences. We are members of the World Council of Churches.

We Copts belong to a conservative and traditional Church, however, we extended our hands to Unity and we studied all aspects because it is the Lord's wish and commandment.

In 1971, when I was a Bishop, I attended the Vienna Pro Oriente Conference. In that conference, we expressed our faith in a "Common Formula" upon which we all agreed and it is as follows:

"We all believe that Our Lord, God and Saviour Jesus Christ is the Incarnate Word, the Incarnate God. We believe that He was perfect in His Divinity and Perfect in His Humanity and that His Divinity never departed His Humanity not even a single instant nor a twinkle of an eye."

I asked them in the Pro Oriente Conference to leave aside all the ancient Greek phrases which had caused divisions and disagreements. To choose simple expressions easy to comprehend. To leave the difficult philosophical matters to the Theologians. Christianity is not only for Philosophers! Our Lord spoke simple, easy words. The children, the illiterate, the uneducated and all the masses understood Him clearly. He never used difficult expressions, He explained even the Parables to His disciples.

In Vienna, we discussed "The One Nature". We Copts and the Roman Catholics believe in what St. Cyril expressed as "The One Nature of the Incarnated Word" but they thought (wrongly) that we believe in one nature and deny the other. This is not the case. We believe that the two natures, His divinity and His Humanity, are in Perfect and Complete Unity. We called this Perfect Unity "The One Nature". It is neither Divinity nor Humanity, it is the Unique Nature of the God Incarnate.

In our Ecumenical meetings, we should talk about actual beliefs regardless of what happened in the past. We must avoid complex and vague expressions. In spite of all the problems that might arise about History, Rites, Ecumenical Councils and so on we, shall achieve good results with Love, Good Spirit and Determination. We shall achieve this together. It is God's will.

The whole Christian world is anxious to see the Church Unite. Christian people - being fed up with divisions and dispersion - are pushing their Church Leaders to do something about Church Unity and I am sure that the Holy Spirit is inspiring us.

Christian Unity will be a magnificent Universal achievement for generations to come.

Let us Pray that we unite in the Faith delivered to us by our Great Fathers who kept it, defended it, and sacrificed their lives for it.

Let us Pray that God works in our hearts and thoughts so that we fulfill His will. Glory be to the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit now and for evermore.

AMEN

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