

As we celebrate the one hundredth anniversary of the Week of Prayer for Christian Unity, I turn to a French Dominican theologian for insight and inspiration, to a man whose influence on the progress of Christian Unity was of vital importance during the years before, during, and after the Second Vatican Council.

Of course there have been and still are many Jesuits whose life work has been to study and foster Christian Unity. Fr. John Courtney Murray, whose writings on religious freedom were so influential, and for whom “ecumenism [must] become a quality inherent in theology, an impulse intrinsic to Christian faith itself.”¹: Fr. Karl Rahner, who developed the concept of the anonymous Christian; Fr. Ted Yarnold, who gave much of his considerable intellect towards fostering the work of ARCIC. Jesuits continue to ponder and to promote Christian Unity; they meet every year, and so the work continues.

I turn to Yves Congar because the theme for this week of prayer is “Pray at all times”; it was in this command of the Lord that Congar understood the meaning of the phrase *lex orandi, lex credendi*: the law of prayer is the law of belief.

For Congar, the law of prayer is “Pray at all times”. So for any Christian who accepts Congar’s view, our starting point must be “pray at all times”. When we do that, we discover that what we do, the stances we take, the theological opinions we hold, our attitude to other Christians and non-Christians, become part of our vocation; they make us who we are in Christ, and the mission of every baptised Christian is to foster Christian unity so that all may be one.

Part of Congar’s vocation as a theologian was to be of help to the people of God, and, for him, this entailed the fostering of Christian unity through his teaching and writing. As early as 1938 he was writing that “[t]he contention that one particular party has invariably been right and that all the wrongs of history come from one side only might satisfy an apologetic whose purely verbal triumphs are illusory. The facts revealed by careful study do not support such a statement.”²

This was dangerous stuff indeed for 1938; and these words remind us that seventy years later there is still a long way to go. The movement towards Christian Unity cannot avoid and must include our looking for ways to come together in liturgical prayer. Congar's work for ecumenism received its beginning and its continuing dynamism from his experience of the liturgy. He saw as much as anyone else that liturgical prayer is the fertile soil where the influence of the Spirit leading the churches towards unity can be experienced, and also that liturgical worship often represents the elements and remnants of the battle between various factions and interpretations. He understood from his knowledge of theological controversies throughout the history of the Church that the restoration of unity between the churches as the one Body of Christ, in one way or another, was essential. He also understood that nothing was possible except by the power of God’s Spirit, the Spirit whom John sees descending from heaven like a dove and *remain*. For Congar it is a sign of the activity of the Spirit in the church that leads ecumenical activity towards its ultimate fruition.

“The spirit is structurally directed towards dialogue, towards welcoming the other, towards what is different. If ecumenism is a quest for the purity and the fullness of the truth about God and the mysteries of salvation, it must be specifically and supremely a welcoming of differences on the basis of a common point of reference and a common destiny.”³

All Christians, who share in the Baptism of the Lord, who hear the call of Jesus to his companions to “Come and see” receive a share in the power of the Spirit of God to draw all into

a form of union where diversity and plurality are celebrated and sanctified.

This will be seen most clearly in the development of the Liturgy: as each expression of the Church of Christ prays to its fullest, so the union of churches in Christ is deepened and renewed by the celebration of diversity and plurality within the one Spirit:

“The Church was established in the world by Pentecost, which gave it a vocation to universality, which was to be achieved not by means of a uniform extension, but by the fact that everyone understood and expressed the marvels of God in his own language (Acts 2:6-11). Through the mission and gift of the Holy Spirit, the Church was born universal by being born manifold and particular. The Church is catholic because it is particular, and it has the fullness of gifts because each has his own gifts.”⁴

Given the importance of ecumenical dialogue for Congar, and the importance he placed on the liturgical life of the church, it is fruitful to explore the possibilities for a liturgical life that is truly ecumenical. At a significant level of faith experience, there is a common thread among all Christian churches. We might describe this as baptismal ecclesiology: all are baptised into the one church, which is the Body of Christ. The agreement of the main Christian churches that baptism using the trinitarian formula is recognised by all, has greater significance when placed in the context of the priesthood of all believers. This role of the Christian, inherited through the act of baptism, is then activated through involvement in the life and work of the particular community where the expression of their belief is practised.

To use Congar’s terminology, through our common baptism we become inheritors of the one Tradition: the continuing life of Christ through the guidance of the Spirit, drawing all people into unity with God. We are saved through the washing of water and the invocation of the Trinity. We are then led to final unity in ways which correspond to our own faith traditions: culturally and historically specific traditions, using symbols and language which rise up from the meeting between our own life-experience and the urgings of God’s Spirit in our lives. For Congar, the best form of growth among differing traditions, within the one common Tradition, is to continue with dialogue and understanding of each tradition’s approach: Congar wrote:

I am a super-champion of dialogue, of which I have been one of the promoters and in which I have been much involved. But in one sense the result of the dialogue has been, if not to “imprison”, at least to confirm each party in its own tradition. In fact each party affirms its identity in the dialogue and maintains it... I recommend a reference to the common basis of our origins. It is not a matter of a freshening up, or attempting an impossible reconstruction of, the Church of the time of the Fathers, but of recognizing together, as a necessary and sufficient condition of communion, the essentials of the faith and order of the Church of the Fathers and the first seven ecumenical councils. That will require a great confessional conversion from all of us.⁵

More recently, the progress of ecumenism among the Christian Churches seems to require a re-commitment from each of us towards fostering this most important end. For Pope Benedict XVI, the act of reaching out to others is an act of love, and without that act of love, we cannot understand the relationship that Christ offers us in the Eucharist.

Without this relationship, the Church suffers; with it, there is the possibility of true unity and ecclesial communion. Thus, whatever the particular differences that exist between ecclesial groups, for Pope Benedict the presence of the love of Christ at the very heart of the Church makes our dialogue with other groups essential.

Our celebration of Eucharist cannot be truly an act of love if we use it to emphasise our separateness or distinctiveness. If it is not fundamentally an act of love then it has no place within the activities of the Body of Christ. Benedict “a Eucharist which does not pass over into the concrete practice of love is intrinsically fragmented”. (#82)

This is a charge given to each of us, for we have all been baptised in water and the Spirit; we have all been called to witness to Jesus, and we are asked to point away from ourselves towards him.

We pray for the courage to be light to the nations in our progress towards unity.

To find Christ in the world that we share with others.

To discover anew how the Spirit of God continues to remain with us as long as we strive for unity. In the power of that Spirit, let us share our belief with each other, and pray, not that unity might be simply an aspiration, but that we might, through enlightened perspiration, truly achieve the unity for which we have struggled for so long.

St Augustine once told his congregation that “When we pray, we are all God’s beggars”⁶
May our prayer for Christian Unity, in which we lament our past failures and seek renewed strength in God’s Spirit, lead us to be honest and loving as we beg for God’s true gift of unity.

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1 J.C. Murray, “Our Response to the Ecumenical Revolution,” *Religious Education* 62 (March-April, 1967), 91 (S. Quitslund, *A Prophet Vindicated* 244).

2 Yves Congar, *Dialogue between Christians*, trans. Philip Loretz SJ (London: Geoffrey Chapman, 1966), 104.

3 Congar, *Diversity and Communion*, 41.

4 *I Believe in the Holy Spirit*, Vol. II, 25-6.

5 Congar, *Fifty Years of Catholic Theology*. Trans. John Bowden (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1988), 77, 81.

6 Sermo 83,2.