

Dear All,

Amid all the kerfuffle of inaugurations, mitten commentary and vaccine politics, I forgot to mention the Week of Prayer for Christian Unity. This is an exercise of daily prayer to be carried out in the week leading up to 25 January. Its purpose – the unity of Christians.

The multiplicity of ‘christian’ denominations (40,000 they say in the US alone) may show just how deep is the conviction that no one should impose his own religious convictions upon another. Or maybe it just shows how unwilling people are to have another’s religious convictions imposed upon themselves. Certainly, this proliferation of ‘christianities’ makes one wonder who the political pundits are talking about when they pontificate about the ‘christian vote’. Just last weekend, the NYT had two long essays, one talking about the rise – with President Biden – of a certain brand of ‘liberal Catholicism’, and the other on the failure of ‘liberal Catholicism’ to enshrine those traits of Catholicism that are its true hallmarks and its most valuable contribution to society. That division of Catholicism into two, means that there are actually 40,001 denominations in the American Christian mix. AUUUUGH!

There is nothing about belief in a Triune God that suggests that diversity/plurality must imply division. Quite the contrary! But the very difficulty we experience in thinking about how three and one can go together suggests that some effort must be involved in holding maintaining unity. It is easy to split; it is hard to stay. The multiplicity of fractures in Christianity suggests that we have taken the easy way out; “*Out*” rather than “*In*”.

I am reminded of the child’s game of Crack the Whip. A line of players runs faster and faster around a pivot point. Centrifugal force seeks to separate the last kid in line from the line itself. Only the refusal of the last two in line to let go of each other; of the last to ‘fly off’ or the second to last to ‘let him go’ keeps the line unbroken. Decades of ‘ecumenical dialog’ with a pretty stable group of Episcopalians, Congregationalists, Catholics, and Orthodox – with the occasional Lutheran, Methodist or Baptist – has convinced me that the desire for unity is unity’s most effective tool. It forces the dis-united to care so much about each other that their differences cease to be motives for separation. Those differences become the price of unity.

What about the truth, you ask?

The Truth is a communion of Persons that cannot exist apart from the identifying characteristics of each; nor can it exist apart from their mutual commitment to each other, a commitment that supports and encourages the identities, rather than swamping them.

Right belief, right morality, right worship, right polity: all are banners around which various groups of Christians have rallied over time. But belief and morality and worship and polity are not gods; they are not even things. They are human ways of thinking, acting, praying, living together. As diverse as they may be one from another, they are authentically Christian only to the extent that they bring their practitioners into a closer oneness with each other. Otherwise they are just proof of how far we are from letting our faith in the Triune God become effective in our ‘life together’ that is really just living apart.

Really and truly and catholically yours, tm