

HAS CHRIST BEEN DIVIDED?

*Presented by Rev. Fr. Charles Odira Kwanya
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In his apostolic letter, *tertio millennio adveniente* (34), Pope John Paul II states that: “Among the sins which require a greater commitment to repentance and conversion should certainly be counted those which have been detrimental to the unity willed by God for his people. In the course of the 1,000 years now drawing to a close, even more than in the first millennium, ecclesial communion has been painfully wounded, a fact ‘for which, at times, people of both sides were to blame’ {UR3}. Such wounds contradict the will of Christ and are a cause of scandal to the world {UR1}.

Pope Francis has repeated this week that division among Christians is a scandal.

PREAMBLE

Every year the Pontifical Council for the Promotion of Christian Unity (Roman Catholic) and the World Council of Churches (WCC) jointly prepare the materials of the Week of Prayer for Christian Unity to be adapted for use all over the world. The Kenya Conference of Catholic Bishops, Commission for Ecumenism in collaboration with other churches has always been keen to digest and distribute the material to different Christian communities. The theme of the Week of Prayer for Christian Unity is provided, based on the experience of the team preparing the materials.

This year the materials were prepared in Canada, reflecting the Canadian diversity; language, culture, race and even religion. The theme, “*Has Christ been divided*” is properly selected to suit this diverse situation and is relevant to our context which is multi-lingual, multi-ethnic, multi-Religious, multi-denominational and even multi-racial. This diversity can sometime be divisive if it is misunderstood. In fact certain Christian churches in the world are founded on the basis of tribe, language, race and even social status. This leads to the question; “*Has Christ been divided in Kenya?*”

GOD WILLS THAT WE MAY ALL BE ONE

In the gospel according to John, Jesus prayed for the unity of all the Christian believers; “*I pray not only for them (the twelve), but also for those who believe in me because of their message. I pray that they may be one. Father! May they be in us, just*

as you are in me and I am in you. May they be one, so that the world will believe that you sent me” (Jn. 17: 20 -21)

In this prayer the following points could be emphasized:

1. Christian unity is primarily Trinitarian in nature

God does not demand uniformity but unity in diversity. As Christians we believe that there is only one God yet three persons: Father, Son and the Holy Spirit. The unity that exists between them is such that you cannot separate them because they are essentially one in their eternal mission; God the Father who loved the world so much such that He sent his only begotten son so that whoever believes in Him shall live forever. As He ascended to heaven He promised to send the Holy Spirit to lead us to the revelation of the whole truth. The Holy Spirit continues to work through the Church, the Church ministers and all the baptized. The followers of Christ must unite in the mission of the Trinity (Father, Son and Holy Spirit) in order to lead the world into the revelation of the whole truth.

2. Christian unity is intended to give witness to Christ

United in this mission, speaking the same language of love to the world and leading the world into the knowledge of God the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit as the ultimate truth we give true witness. We cannot witness to the truth if we contradict the very reason for which we exist. Truth is Christ so we must stick to him.

3. The Holy Spirit unites us in the mission of Christ

Many scholars maintain that the church of Christ was born on the day of Pentecost. The disciples of Jesus were waiting in prayer in a closed place for the promises of the Holy Spirit upon them. This was fulfilled and the participants from different parts of the world experienced the unity of the believers. Everyone spoke his language and all the others could hear in their own. This is the Christian spirit; diverse but united in Christ.

MAIN SHIFTS IN THE HISTORY OF THE CHURCH

The spirit of ecumenism has always been based on the teaching that Christ founded one, Holy and Apostolic Church, not churches. Consequently, the efforts are focused on the hope that through prayer, education and dialogue the original reunion may once again be fully realized and this is the target of ecumenical initiatives.

Over the time there has been reaction and counter reactions manifested in reforms and counter reforms in the history of Church.

1. ***Apostolic Church:*** This was the true Church of Christ, composed of eye witnesses of Jesus, acting and living according to the spirit of Christ. It was a true missionary and prophetic church whose mandate was to evangelize through witness.
2. ***Community Church:*** This was the image of the Early Church, the Church of the Acts of the Apostles. They shared all that they had, not equally but according to the needs of individuals. Amidst confusion of the leadership and apostolate they remained united in prayer and the breaking of the word and bread
3. ***Clerical Church:*** This was the Medieval Church which was extremely wealthy, powerful, status quo and clerical. This was the undesired Church that provoked the spirit of reaction and counter reaction.
4. ***Broken Church:*** This describes the reformation church which it resisted the temptations of worldliness and yearned for a return to the Apostolic Church. While the Protestants maintained that salvation is through faith alone, the Catholics added that outside the visible Church, there is no salvation. And the fight continued
5. ***Ecumenical Church:*** The Vatican two Council was rightly referred to as the Ecumenical Council. The Modern Church, aware of her imperfections and the need to reconcile with each other in a multi religious world started building bridges within the Christian religion. Christians had to look at each other and ask what are we fighting for?
6. ***Digital Church:*** This where we are; a very secularized church, going more into the world not necessarily to save it but to own the world. The life style that provoked reformation is has eventually come back to destroy the Christian spirit. The churches are making wealth in the name of Jesus Christ. Church ministers have become so innovative; *kupanda mbegu*, instead of giving the verse of the Bible to be read at home, all you see is M-Pesa, bank accounts etc. Going to heaven has become so expensive. This is not our mandate; the churches have become the churches of the rich on one side and the poor on the other. Has Christ been divided?

The effort of ecumenical initiative is to turn to the original Apostolic Church, missionary and prophetic not overpowered by the institutional ambitions.

DIVISION IS THE WORK OF THE DEVIL

There is a big difference between division and diversity; while division refers to the negative disharmonies in any community, diversity is about variety in the community. In other words diversity is a value and natural to any society while division is the opposite of unity. In the church we can speak of relationships in two ways; vertical and horizontal:

1. Vertical: Man and God

The main issue is what is the truth about God

In the book of Genesis man and woman are created in the image of God so that they do not just represent God but they are one with him by nature, as long as this relationship lasts then we are safe on the contrary we are condemned.

In the story of the fall of man Satan incites Eve and Adam against God their creator. They knew the instructions of God perfectly; *“God told us not to eat the fruit of that tree or even touch it; if we do, we die.”* Satan knew the truth but preferred to turn the truth upside down; he said to the woman, *“That’s not true, you will not die”*. Satan wanted to separate man from God’s favour and so he did.

This is why in the book of Job; God said to men, *“To be wise, you must have reverence for the Lord. To understand, you must turn from evil.”* (20:28) to understand the will of God that is; to be one we must be wise.

2. Horizontal: Man and man

The main issue regards who is better before God?

This division between man and God naturally leads to the division between man and man because away from God we are disintegrated. The sons of Adam and Eve; Cain and Abel began to fight each other, whose sacrifice is more acceptable.

The question of which church says the truth about God, whose sacrifice, whose prayer, whose preaching is acceptable to God, is the big issue in the relationship among Christians and it is devil’s strategy. The obsession with who is the best rocks the Christian world in a very negative and scandalous manner. It is interesting listening to the many sermons delivered by different Christian churches especially in crusades. Almost 80% of the messages are attacks on other Christian churches. The churches and church ministers want to survive on the basis of the apparent failures of others.

A story is told of Jesus at the football match;

The first team scores and he is excited. The second team scores and he is equally excited. A friend next to him is concerned and asks; hey man which team you are supporting. Jesus turns to him smiling and responds I am not here to support any team but to enjoy the game.

The main question in ecumenism is not about which church Christ belongs to but about whether we all in our diversity we belong to the Church of Christ the apostolic Church. As Christians we belong to the same team with Christ as the team leader while evangelization is the friendly game among Christians which we should all enjoy through the success of each other. The survival of any Christian church or preacher is not based on failures of the other but on the transformation that Christ's message brings to every individual. In fact the failure of any Christian Church is a failure of all the members of the team of Christ.

In this way the first unity is essentially with my team leader; my spiritual relationship with my God determines my physical relationship with fellow human beings.

CHRISTIAN UNITY IS ABOUT CONVERSION OF HEART

Today the Christian world is commemorating the feast day of the conversion of St. Paul. We recall the maturity and conviction of St. Paul; as an agent of darkness Paul, by then Saul persecuted Christians, not knowing that it was Christ that he was fighting him until he met Him and was converted. His conversion turned him from being a devil's advocate to being a soldier in the army of Christ.

Christ identifies with Christians in a very particular way to the extent that our actions can either betray our relationship with him or build it. When Christians are divided, the Body of Christ is divided too.

Evangelization is not about loyalty to personalities or churches it is about conversion to Christ. If you find yourself becoming more popular than Jesus Christ in your church then you will soon replace Him; be careful. The 1st letter of St. Paul to the Corinthians 1:1 – 17 is clearly presenting the typical picture of the reality of division among the Christians. The believers are rallying behind their favorite preachers, some Apollo, some Peter others Paul etc.

In our Churches conversion is almost to a church or to an individual so that if that individual is not there then I quit. We are agents of evangelization not of division.

I like to give the example of Jesus and the donkey, the people of Jerusalem spread the braches, red carpet yet Jesus did not step on it, the donkey enjoyed it

Our churches, our pastors, preachers and all who bring the word of God to us are just like donkeys, drop Jesus and you are worse than that donkey. ***We are relevant to the extent that we carry Jesus along.***

The spirit of ecumenism calls for the servant leadership as reflected in the Gospel according to St Luke; Jesus challenges his disciples about the meaning of true greatness. We are great to the extent that we possess Christ in our lives.

CONCLUSION

Finally, as believers in Christ living in a multi-religious, cultural, ethnic, lingual and racial world we need to be true witnesses; to lead by examples. Many preachers like the gospel of “*do what they tell you but not what they do*” because if they preach what they do then it will be a disaster.

A dying old lady sent for me to go and say the last prayer before finally surrender to the will of the Heavenly Father. While praying I assured her, like all pastors do, that “tonight you will dine at the same table with Jesus and the angels”; she was so excited and requested my presence at that dinner. I declined saying that I had no appetite at the moment, may be in future.

- The spirit of ecumenism is a spirit of witness. Witness is key to the ecumenical relationship; we come together as Christians to manifest our common faith in Christ
- Christian Conversion is to Christ, not to an individual Church or person. Christ must increase and we must decrease.
- Mutual respect based on common faith in Christ; tradition and scripture should guide our life together as Christians not ambition and pride.
- So the Church of Christ cannot continue to be divided