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A History of the Week of Prayer for Christian Unity

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The centenary of the movement of prayer for Christian unity on a formal and annual basis turns our thoughts to one major stream in the history of this extraordinary phenomenon. This stream was the Octave of Prayer for Christian Unity that was first observed in January, 1908. Celebrated in the chapel of a small Atonement Franciscan Convent of the Protestant Episcopal Church, on a remote hillside fifty miles from New York City, this new prayer movement caught the imagination of others beyond the Franciscan Friars and Sisters of the Atonement to become an energetic movement that gradually blossomed into a worldwide observance involving many nations and millions of people.

To fully appreciate this stream that had been fed by some and had converged with other significant streams in the historical development of the Week of Prayer for Christian Unity, we must examine some aspects of the movement's early history. Two American Episcopalians, Father Paul Wattson and Sister Lurana White, co-founders of the Franciscan Friars and Sisters of the Atonement, were totally committed to the reunion of the Anglican Communion with the Roman Catholic Church.¹ No one knew better than Fr. Paul the obstacles that stood in the way of the goal of reunion. But the conviction and faith of these two Anglican Franciscans in the power of the Spirit to transform minds and hearts far outweighed any fears and trepidation about the success of their new prayer venture.

In fact, Fr. Paul Wattson expressed his strong convictions in this regard in his little

magazine called *The Lamp*, each page of which bore the words of John 17:21 "that they all may be one." Wattson asked in an editorial of *The Lamp* in 1903: "Is then Christian unity a visionary dream? Will the prayer of the Son of God never be answered?" He responded to his question:

God's will is omnipotent; the Fiat of the Most High must prevail; the prayer of Jesus Christ has got to be answered... Sooner or later every petition of Christ will inevitably be granted. Were the mountains of difficulty to be surmounted a thousand times higher and vaster than they are God is able to cast them into the sea. Faith serenely rests her case with Him."²

Fr. Paul and Sr. Lurana started a prayer movement that explicitly prayed for the return of non-Catholic Christians to the Holy See. Needless to say, such an observance would attract few of our separated brothers and sisters except for a small number of Anglo-Catholics and Roman Catholics themselves. The idea of a period of prayer for Christian unity originated in a conversation with an English clergyman by the name of Spencer Jones. Spencer Jones suggested in 1907 that a day such as St. Peter's feast day be set aside for prayer for Christian unity and for sermons on the pope. Fr. Paul Wattson agreed with the concept but offered the idea of an octave of prayer between the Feast of St. Peter's Chair on January 18 and the Feast of the Conversion of St. Paul on January 25.³

The intentions for each day of the Octave of Prayer for the Unity of Christians make clear why most other Christians could not join Roman Catholics their prayer for unity. The intentions for each day of the Octave included the return of other Christians, the return of Oriental separatists, the submission of Anglicans, that Lutherans and Continental Protestants find their way back to the Holy Church, that Christians in America become one in union with the Chair of St. Peter, the return to the sacraments of lapsed Catholics, the

conversion of the Jews and the missionary conquest of the world.⁴

When Fr. Paul and Sr. Lurana became Roman Catholics, Pope Pius X gave his blessing to the Octave of Prayer and in 1916, Pope Benedict extended its observance to the universal church. This recognition by papal authority gave the Octave its impetus throughout the Roman Catholic Church. Until his death in 1940, Fr. Paul promoted the Octave of Prayer for Christian Unity, later known as the Chair of Unity Octave to emphasize its Petrine focus, through his magazine, *The Lamp*.

What were some of the important historical antecedents to this octave of prayer? Certainly in the 19th century, one could say that the desire for Christians to pray together was part of the spirit of the age among those alarmed by the divisions which weakened the power of Christian witness. 1846, for instance, saw the creation in London of the Evangelical Alliance which had both international and inter-church connections. Ruth Rouse noted that it was “the one and only definitely ecumenical organization... which arose out of the Evangelical Awakening in the 19th century.”⁵ The concept of unity espoused in their constitution was union among Christian individuals of different churches for renewal in the Spirit; they would not deal with the question of the reunion of churches. The Alliance set aside one week beginning on the first Sunday of the year, for united prayer for members of different churches to pray for renewal in the Spirit. One of the weaknesses of the Alliance, according to Rouse, was its incompatible objectives in which, on the one hand, it sought to unite Christians in bonds of brotherly love while being at the same time outspokenly anti-Catholic.⁶ The hostility, in fact, was so great that at a meeting in 1851, Norman MacLeod of the Church of Scotland felt obliged to say that “even Roman Catholics should be addressed in a spirit of kindness and love.”⁷

The Association for the Promotion of the Unity of Christians was founded in 1857 by Anglican Bishop Forbes of Brechin and Dr. F.G. Lee on the Anglican side and Ambrose Lyle Phillipps (later known as Ambrose Phillipps de Lisle) and A.W. Pugin on the Roman Catholic side. Its purpose was “for united prayer that visible unity may be restored to Christendom.” Prominent Catholics and the second generation of the Oxford Movement joined the Association. This association united in membership Anglicans, Roman Catholics and Orthodox. They adopted the prayer for unity and peace, that follows the Our Father contained in the communion rite of the Roman liturgy, to be said daily by the members along with the Our Father. However, in time Rome condemned the Association and forbade all Catholics from joining it. As Henry Brandreth wrote in *A History of the Ecumenical Movement*, “The papal seal was thus put on the idea that united prayer between Roman Catholics and other Christians was impossible- a strange fate for a union for prayer for unity with no other purpose.”⁸ The problem, of course, was not the act of prayer in itself as much as the questions concerning the nature of the church and the nature of the unity being sought through prayer. This difficulty would not begin to be resolved until almost the middle of the 20th century.

It is noteworthy that the popes had urged Roman Catholics to pray for Christian unity but from the particular stance of return to the Roman Catholic Church. In 1894 Leo XIII encouraged Catholics to recite the rosary for the intention of Christian unity. Again, in 1897, he decreed in *Provida matris* that the days between Ascension and Pentecost should be dedicated to prayer for reconciliation with our separated brethren. In his encyclical *Divinum illud*, Leo sought to establish this practice of prayer as a permanent feature of the Roman Catholic Church.⁹

The Lambeth Conferences during this period also promoted prayer for Christian unity. Rouse notes that the second conference of 1878 was typical of the concern of Anglicans for reunion. At that conference, the bishops spoke of their desire that the conference support the observance of a season of prayer for the unity of Christendom. They suggested the Tuesday before Ascension Day or any of the seven days after the celebration of the Ascension.¹⁰ Later in April, 1906, a letter signed by the Archbishops of Canterbury and York, the Primus of the Episcopal Church in Scotland, and the heads of most of the Free churches in England appeared in the London Times. This letter appealed to every congregation within the jurisdictions of the signors to pray for unity on Whitsunday.

In 1913 the Faith and Order Commission of the Protestant Episcopal Church published a leaflet promoting prayer for unity on Whitsunday and in 1915 published a Manual of Prayer for Unity. The preparatory Conference on Faith and Order at Geneva in 1920 appealed for a special week of prayer for Christian unity ending with Whitsunday. Faith and Order continued to issue "Suggestions for an Octave of Prayer for Christian Unity" until 1941 when it changed the dates for its week to that of the January Octave. In this way, Christians, who for reasons of conscience could not join with others in prayer services, could share in united prayer at the same time.¹¹ These various efforts while not attaining wide observance among the churches were to pave the way for the Week of Prayer for Christian Unity which came to be observed widely throughout Christendom.

We had already noted that different understandings of church and of unity had prevented Roman Catholics from praying with others and had prevented Protestants and Anglicans from praying with Roman Catholics during the Octave. The breakthrough in terms of our being able to pray together came from a French ecumenist in 1935. The Abbé

Paul Couturier, a priest of the Archdiocese of Lyons, sought a solution to the problem of non-Roman Catholics not being able to observe the Octave of Prayer for Christian Unity. He found the solution in the Roman Missal as the Association for Promotion of the Unity of Christians had done seventy-eight years earlier in England. Couturier promoted prayer for Christian unity on the inclusive basis that “our Lord would grant to his Church on earth that peace and unity which were in his mind and purpose, when, on the eve of His Passion, He prayed that all might be one.”¹²

In 1939 Couturier wrote: “The whole fabric of Christendom must be shaken to its very depths by the universal prayer of Christians; it must experience a supernatural shock which will break down its prejudices, rectify its superficial and false ideas, cause hearts to grow into one another, and finally unite hearts in the eternal light of the one Christ.”¹³ Couturier turned to John's Gospel, Chapter 17 to Christ's consecratory prayer: “that all may be one”. He taught that Christ continues to offer this prayer through the Christian people and so sought to include as many Christians as possible in offering this prayer with Christ to the Father. This prayer would unite Christians in prayer for that perfect unity that God wills and by the means that he wills.¹⁴ Like Fr. Paul Wattson, Abbé Couturier exhibited a powerful passion for unity and had sent out “calls to prayer” annually until his death in 1953.¹⁵

While not all Catholics had accepted Couturier's solution and some continued to emphasize the centrality of the Petrine office in unity efforts and prayer, all difficulties were resolved in 1964 with the promulgation of the Decree on Ecumenism of the Second Vatican Council. The Decree told Roman Catholics in clear and unambiguous terms: “In certain special circumstances, such as in prayer services for unity and during ecumenical

gatherings, it is allowable, indeed desirable, that Catholics should join in prayer with their separated brethren. Such prayers in common are certainly a very effective means of petitioning for the grace of unity, and they are a genuine expression of the ties which even now bind Catholics to their separated brethren.”¹⁶

In 1993 the Pontifical Council For Promoting Christian Unity issued the *Directory for the Application of Principles and Norms of Ecumenism* and explicitly encouraged participation in the Week of Prayer:

Shared prayer should, however, be particularly concerned with the restoration of Christian unity. It can centre, e.g. on the mystery of the church and its unity, on baptism as a sacramental bond of unity, or on the renewal of personal or community life as a necessary means to achieving unity. Prayer of this type is particularly recommended during the “Week of Prayer for Christian Unity” or in the period between Ascension and Pentecost.¹⁷

In the exhortation that concluded Pope John Paul II's encyclical letter *Ut unum sint*, the Pope asked how we were to strengthen the Church's unity and make it grow towards full communion. He responded that it would be done through prayer. He wrote, “Prayer should always concern itself with the longing for unity, and as such is one of the basic forms of our love for Christ and for the Father who is rich in mercy. In this journey which we are undertaking with other Christians toward the new millennium prayer must occupy the first place.”¹⁸

Today we have come a long way from Pope Pius IX's condemnation of the Association for the Promotion of Christian Unity with its desire for common prayer for unity. The Week of Prayer for Christian Unity belongs to all Christians who are sincerely interested in the fulfillment of Christ's prayer “that all may be one.” Today it is sponsored by the Commission on Faith and Order of the World Council of Church and the Pontifical

Council for Christian Unity. On a national basis, materials for the celebration of the Week of Prayer are the work of the Graymoor Ecumenical & Interreligious Institute in collaboration with the Commission on Faith and Order of the National Council of Churches and the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops' Committee for Ecumenical and Interreligious Affairs.¹⁹

In *A Handbook of Spiritual Ecumenism*, Cardinal Walter Kasper writes:

Prayer for unity is the royal door of ecumenism: it leads Christians to look at the kingdom of God and the unity of the Church in a fresh way; it deepens their bonds of communion, and it enables them to courageously face painful memories, social burden and human weakness. In every age of history the principal artisans of reconciliation and unity were persons of prayer and contemplation, inspiring divided Christians to recommit themselves to walk the path of unity.²⁰

When he discusses prayer in common, Cardinal Kasper specifically mentions that “the celebration of the annual Week of Prayer for Christian Unity world-wide is an initiative of singular importance to be encouraged and further developed.”²¹

On this centenary of Christians efforts to establish an annual period of prayer for Christian unity, the theme has been chosen by the Graymoor Ecumenical & Interreligious Institute together with the Faith and Order Commission of the National Council of Churches and the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops' Committee for Ecumenical and Interreligious Affairs. That theme is “Pray without ceasing” from 1 Thessalonians 5:12a, 13b-18.²² The full text is, “But we appeal to you, brothers and sisters... Be at peace among yourselves. And we urge you, beloved to admonish the idlers, encourage the faint-hearted, help the weak, be patient with all of them. See that none of you repays evil for evil, but always seek to do good to one another and to all. Rejoice always, pray without ceasing, give thanks in all circumstances; for this is the will of God in Jesus Christ for you.”

We do rejoice in the progress that has been made through these many years in the reconciliation of Christians to one another. We offer thanks to God for leading us by the power of the Spirit to eliminate obstacles to prayer for unity. We do not cease to pray for that same assistance to overcome those obstacles that hinder the fulfillment of Christ will for the church: "that all may be one."

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Notes:

1. Charles Angell, Charles Lafontaine, *Prophet of Reunion*. New York: Seabury Press, 1975, p. 31 ff.
2. *Ibid.*, pp. 69-70.
3. *Ibid.*, p. 81.
4. *Ibid.*, p. 85.
5. Ruth Rouse, Stephen Charles Neill, *A History of the Ecumenical Movement: 1517-1948*. Geneva: World Council of Churches, p. 320.
6. *Ibid.*, p. 323.
7. *Ibid.*
8. *Ibid.*, p. 347.
- 9 Charles Angell, S.A., Robert Mercer, S.A. "How Christians Came to Pray Together" in Emmanuel Sullivan, S.A., *Prayer For Unity*. New York: Graymoor Ecumenical Institute.
10. Rouse, Neill, p. 347.
11. *Ibid.*, p. 349.
12. *Ibid.*, p. 348.
13. Angell, Mercer, p. 49.
14. *Ibid.*
15. Rouse, Neill, p. 349.
16. *Unitatis redintegratio* (8) as translated in Austin Flannery, O.P., *Vatican Council II: The Conciliar and Post-Conciliar Documents*. New York: Costello Publishing Co. 1984, p 460.
17. Pontifical Council for Promoting Christian Unity: *Directory for the Application of Principles and Norms on*

Ecumenism. Vatican City 1993, (111).

18. John Paul II, *Ut unum sint* (1995), (102).

19. Resources for the Week of Prayer for Christian Unity, Graymoor Ecumenical & Interreligious Institute:
<http://www.geii.org>.

20. Cardinal Walter Kasper, *A Handbook For Spiritual Ecumenism*. Hyde Park, NY: New City Press, 2007, p.11.

21. *Ibid.* p.48.

22. Resources for the Week of Prayer for Christian Unity, Graymoor Ecumenical & Interreligious Institute:
<http://www.geii.org>.