

DIOCESE OF NORTHAMPTON



PASTORAL LETTER ON CHRISTIAN UNITY

Dear Brothers and Sisters,

Last year I visited two Pastoral Areas to meet with parishioners involved in the work of Christian Unity. I had not expected much of a response. How wrong I was! I was greatly encouraged by the commitment of priests and people engaged with other Christian communities in prayer, in Bible study, and in joint action - to provide food for the hungry and shelter for the homeless. I have no doubt that that pattern of ecumenical activity is reflected in all parts of our Diocese.

During this Week of Prayer for Christian Unity and in this Diocesan Year of Prayer and Vocation, I want to urge you to pray for the unity of all who believe in Jesus Christ and to respond to the prayer of Jesus that "all may be one. (*John 17:21*)" The Church teaches in the Vatican II Decree on Ecumenism that "men and women who believe in Christ and have been truly baptised are in communion with the Catholic Church even though the communion is imperfect. (*Unitatis Redintegratio 3*)" It is because of our common baptism and because of the scandal of our separation that we must pray and work for Christian Unity

The division among Christians touches so many of us at the heart of our homes and our family life. Husbands and wives often belong to different Christian traditions, and it is you who have the lead role in the ecumenical task. In Christ, you hold the unity of the family and respect each other's Christian beliefs. Recently, I was so moved to be invited into the home of a committed Baptist and a committed Catholic to listen to them and their children about their experience and their journey.

In a talk to the Pontifical Council for Promoting Christian Unity in November 2016, Pope Francis spoke of "Unity" as a journey, not a destination. He said, "Unity is not the fruit of our human efforts, but a gift that comes from on high." "We are not able to achieve unity by ourselves," the Pope continued, "Nor can we decide its forms and timing Our task is that of receiving the gift of Unity on our journey (of faith) It requires patient waiting, effort and commitment."

Because the journey to Christian Unity can seem profoundly slow, some people have given up the effort and commitment Pope Francis speaks of. Others have taken matters into their own hands and decided that differences do not matter.

Both of those attitudes are wrong. Christian Unity is an essential requirement of our faith. It is a requirement that springs from our relationship with Jesus. So, we cannot set aside Christ's will for unity. The Spirit of hope must sustain us.

At the same time, Christ is the way, the truth and the life. We are nurtured in our relationship with him in the family of the Church to which we belong. If we are true to Christ, then we must be true to the teaching of the Church flowing from Christ and respect the differences of other Christian traditions, not just be indifferent or set those differences to one side. We must be true to Christ and true to his Church.

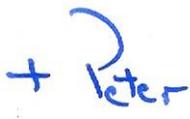
In today's Gospel, Jesus begins his public ministry with a challenge - "The kingdom of God is close at hand. Repent, and believe the Good News. (*Mark 1:15*)" For all of us who are baptised, there is the constant call to conversion, to turn away from sin and live the commandments of love. That includes praying and working together with our Christian brothers and sisters and being honest with one another about the truths of the faith we hold as the Church.

There is the pain and the triumph of the cross. It is our personal and community conversion, our gradual conforming to Christ, our living increasingly in him, that enables us to grow in communion between us. Our communion as Christians can only be in Christ.

So, we must journey on together, encountering each other as brothers and sisters, praying together, and working together to proclaim the Gospel and in the service of others. We are called to share the variety of gifts in each Christian community which are rooted in the apostolic tradition.

In the readings at Mass, there is a note of urgency. Jonah urges the people of Nineveh to repent. Paul speaks of our time growing short, and the fishermen respond "at once" to Christ's call to follow him. May that urgent spirit of God's Word prompt us in our parishes and schools to pray and to work together for Christian Unity.

With every blessing,

A handwritten signature in blue ink that reads "+ Peter". The plus sign is on the left, and the name "Peter" is written in a cursive style to its right.

Bishop of Northampton

*To be read and/or made available at all Masses of
the Third Ordinary Sunday of the Year, 20/21 January 2018.*