

Feast of St. Paul, January 18, 2009  
Holy Trinity, Buffalo, NY  
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## **CHRISTIAN UNITY – 2009**

Today is the Feast of St. Paul and it begins the Octave for Christian Unity. This focus on ecumenicity began a hundred years ago and it runs from the feast of St. Paul to the feast of St. Peter – eight days. The Octave began because there was an awareness that more unity was needed among Christians.

And this week of prayer has survived a lot of ups and down in Christian unity over the past century. For instance, many of you remember the days when Lutherans and Catholics were archenemies – at least in some quarters. If you had a Lutheran daughter, you prayed that she wouldn't fall in love with a Catholic boy. And Catholic parents did the same with their children. These were prayers that obviously didn't work – we keep forgetting that love concurs all.

When John Kennedy ran for president, there were some very nasty things said about Roman Catholics in Protestant churches – especially in the Lutheran Churches in the mid-west.

But Vatican II, called by Pope John XXIII in the 60's, changed the whole scenario. All of a sudden the windows of the churches were thrown open, and the fresh breezes of understanding and common concerns entered in. In fact, things have advanced so much that only a few years ago, the Roman Catholic Church and the Lutheran World Federation signed a document in which each side rescinded all the condemnations they had made against each other in the 16<sup>th</sup> century, and they both agreed that salvation was by God's grace and not by good works. Remember how that "grace not works" thing used to be the catch phrases for Lutherans when they tried to differentiate themselves from Roman Catholics?

The Lutherans have also made great progress in uniting with the Protestant denominations. We have gone so far as to accept each other's clergy as kosher, and we can serve in each other's congregations without any special dispensations. And all this has happened because of extensive study and our coming to respect each other's position.

For instance, The Episcopal Church holds to the principle of ordination by bishops, having the understanding that since the early church, leaders have been made bonified by the laying on of hands by bishops – starting with Peter. This is known as the apostolic succession. Luther ignored this practice, although in the early documents of the Lutheran Church – namely in the Apology to the Augsburg Confession, it is recognized that Bishops had been a part of the church’s history, and that it was in order to carry on in that tradition. One main reason why Luther broke with the practice was that virtually no German bishops joined the Reformation movement. If Luther wanted to have leadership in his congregations, he needed to bypass the apostolic tradition.

The Lutherans in Sweden, however, kept the apostolic succession intact because all their bishops switched their allegiances to Luther’s movement.

When the Episcopalians and Lutherans wanted to come together, we agreed that the Episcopalians would immediately recognize the validity of Lutheran ordination, and from now on a bishop would be part of Lutheran ordinations. In fact, as the Lutheran Ecumenical Officer, I was the first non-Episcopalian clergy person to preside at a Communion service at Buffalo’s St. Paul’s Cathedral.

There was, however, resistance to this agreement from some ELCA Lutherans – and we should note that the Missouri Synod was never a part of these negotiations. The concerned group which called themselves, “Word Alone”, were vehemently opposed to accepting this agreement. The main strength of this group was in the Midwest – especially in the Dakotas, but there was also a serious enclave here in Western New York. When the agreement was approved by our national church, several midwestern congregations withdrew from the ELCA and formed their own association.

It is noteworthy that whenever there is an attempt at unity in the church, there will be some collateral division. There will always be some who feel that their church – or their part of the church has sold them out.

There is one dimension to the faith that has been exceptionally sticky since the Reformation, and that is the meaning of Holy Communion. So let me give you a brief history of the Sacrament, because many people still don’t understand what the historical issues were.

In the early church, Holy Communion was a reenactment of the Last Supper. It was part of what was called an Agape feast – or a love feast – during which the followers of Jesus gathered and shared a weekly meal. At the beginning of the meal the bread was blessed and shared with the words of Jesus being recalled – that this was his body. After the meal the wine was passed with the words of Jesus that this was his blood. The meal was soon ritualized and became was the major focus of Christian worship.

However, some serious problems arose in the church during this early period – which St. Paul deals with in his letters. For instance, these were meals where people brought their own food. The more wealthy Christians brought elaborate food while the poor people attending had barely enough to eat. Another problem was too much drinking – and a consequent loss of the somberness and sanctity of the meal.

This would be little like Joe Kryszczuk bringing a growler of his home made beer to a church dinner and drinking it all himself. But Joe doesn't do that – he is a good Christian, and he shares – he told me that he had learned a lot from our sermons here at Holy Trinity.

There has always been a problem, however, in defining what actually happens in Communion when the bread and wine are consecrated. The church agreed that Christ was truly present in the sacrament, but how could the elements be changed from bread and wine to the body and blood of Jesus and still look like bread and wine. The Roman Church used Greek philosophy to explain it – albeit, it's a little too complicated to explain in a sermon. Luther agreed that the bread and wine were truly Christ's body and blood, but he had little patience with the Greek explanation as to how it happened. For Luther, Christ was truly present, but it was a mystery.

Many of the other Reformers however – namely Zwingly and Calvin – who started the Reformed churches which include the Presbyterian and United Church of Christ – said that Christ was not really present, but that Communion was a memorial meal. After all, Jesus did say to, “do this in memory of me”. However, after a lot of work and some clever and creative theological thinking, these Reformed Churches in dialogue with the Lutherans came to the conclusion that there was a lot of common ground – enough so that we could feel comfortable with each others celebration of the Last Supper.

As you can see – the church has come a long way in recent years. But as you also know there is still a lot of division within the various traditions – including the Jewish tradition. In fact, the divisions these days are not so much the historical ones, but emotional ones – differences based more on what one considers orthodox than on what one considers loving and acceptable. One has to wonder if what is being played out here is not faith but in security. I believe that it was Eli Wiesel who said, “A super orthodox person is not a person of deep faith, but a person with deep fear.”

The person, who must hold tight to the past and the traditional, is the person who is threatened by change.

This is NOT to deny the past or tradition, but when anger erupts over religious issues it is not because the orthodox have super faith, but because change is threatening.

But today, we celebrate what we have in common as Christians. We celebrate our one Lord, and our calling to love others as we have been redeemed and loved.