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The Week of Christian Unity

Richard McBrien | Jan. 12, 2009 Essays in Theology

We are coming once again upon the Week of Prayer for Christian Unity (Jan. 18-25). For more than a decade this column has offered consecutive annual reflections on the state of ecumenism, prompted by this century?s-long observance.

Essays in Theology by Fr. Richard McBrien

I had devoted several columns to the Week of Prayer even before 1997, the first of which appeared exactly 40 years ago, in 1969.
I predicted in that column that some Christians would give their ?customary lip-service support? to the quest for church unity, only to resume their ?business-as-usual, sectarian posture for the rest of the year. Most will ignore [the Week of Prayer] entirely.?

Over the years, the ecumenical movement has made a marked impact at the upper levels of church life (bishops, theologians, priests, ministers, religious, and certain key lay people), but little among the so-called rank-and-file or grass-roots membership.

The late Cardinal Avery Dulles agreed. In his mind, ecumenism has remained too much the exclusive concern of specialists and too little the real concern of everyday Christians (See my column for Jan. 26, 1976: **The State of Ecumenism Today** [1].)

In reviewing each of the columns written on the subject, I was struck by the number of times they ended on a sober, if also hopeful, note. Most of the achievements of the ecumenical movement, the columns noted, have been in the past. In recent decades ecumenism seems to be in a state of drift rather than of innovation and vibrancy.

If anything could bring us out of our collective lethargy, I suggested in the column of 40 years ago, it would be the experience of intercommunion, or eucharistic sharing. Once we begin celebrating the sacraments together, especially the Eucharist, Christians would see that the ecumenical movement ?means more than friendly handshakes and occasional joint prayer services.?

I suggested at the time that Catholics would have far more difficulty with intercommunion than Protestants and Anglicans, not that the latter are indifferent to its ecclesiological implications.

But Catholics have tended to take a more one-sided view of St. Thomas Aquinas?s theology of the Eucharist and the teaching of the Second Vatican Council on the subject.

Catholics traditionally stress that the Eucharist is a sign of unity, and as such intercommunion, or eucharistic sharing, is prohibited. But the Eucharist, as both Aquinas and Vatican II insisted, is also a means of grace -- the

grace of unity.

The council implicitly laid the foundation for intercommunion, even if it did not openly endorse it, when it declared that common eucharistic worship ?should provide a sharing in the means of grace.?

?The fact that (the Eucharist) should signify unity generally rules out common worship. Yet the gaining of a needed grace sometimes commends it? (Decree on Ecumenism, n. 8).

?For too long,? I wrote some 40 years ago this week, ?we have asked only the question, ?Dare we eat the Lord?s Supper together?? It is time now to give at least equal attention to a second question, ?Dare we continue to eat apart??

?From a theological point of view, perfect doctrinal or structural unity is not required before Christians can celebrate the sacraments together.?

?When intercommunion becomes more common (but never indiscriminately so), even the so-called grass-roots church will begin to see how far we have gone beyond the dogmatism and isolationism of the past.?

Unfortunately, some four decades later we seem no closer to the achievement of real progress on the delicate matter of intercommunion, or eucharistic sharing, than we were in 1969.

Where there has been some forward movement, it has been at the grass-roots level. While the teachings and regulations of the official church remain unchanged, many Catholics and other Christians have been acting with their feet.

Whether we like it or not, intercommunion has been happening on a regular basis at Sunday Masses and in the liturgies of other Christian churches, and particularly at weddings and funerals.

The incidents of such unofficial and essentially private forms of eucharistic sharing have become so common in fact that in some Catholic churches, and especially on public occasions when the bishop is present, priests feel compelled to remind the non-Catholics in the congregation that they are not to come forward for Holy Communion.

Comparable warnings are not given in Protestant and Episcopal churches. On the contrary, their tendency is to welcome all baptized Christians to the reception of Communion.

I recommend that readers review some of the previous essays on the Week of Prayer for Christian Unity, which are available on my Web site (**www.richardmcbrien.com** [3]). By typing in ?Week of Prayer? (with the quotation marks) in the search engine, each of the pertinent columns will become accessible.

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