

## **Love Informed By Truth: Thoughts on Apologetics and Ecumenism**

**by Mark D. Steele**

**Summary:** In this essay, the author discusses the apparent incompatibility between ecumenism and apologetics and argues that good apologetics are essential to the development of true unity. He distinguishes between a true unity that gives high priority to truth and false types of unity that sacrifice truth in exchange for certain understandings of love. The author relates this argument from his own personal journey of conversion from fundamentalist Protestantism to the Catholic faith.

May the God of steadfastness and encouragement grant you to live in such harmony with one another, in accord with Christ Jesus, that together you may with one voice glorify the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ. Welcome one another, therefore, as Christ has welcomed you, for the glory of God. Romans 15:5-7 (RSV)

Passing from principles, from the obligations of the Christian conscience, to the actual practice of the ecumenical journey towards unity, the Second Vatican Council emphasizes above all the need for interior conversion. Pope John Paul II<sup>1</sup>

## Introduction

True conversion often includes, but is not primarily, an intellectual process. Mine was no exception. In hindsight, I can see a lengthy path from a fundamentalist and Pentecostal Protestant childhood through apostasy eventually to the Catholic Church. This journey was truly ecumenical. It included the Congregationalist minister who fielded questions thrown up in challenge without every voicing doubt about the validity of the quest. It involved the Lutheran chaplain who gave me my first understanding of the theology of sacramental grace and who considers himself a catholic with a small “c”. And it is helped by my wife who incarnates the deep truths of the Catholic faith in her daily life and in her vocation. The fact that I was present before Christ in many Masses, without participating, must have prepared my heart so that I was ready for the answers provided by so many excellent apologetics authors. Three years ago, the Catholic Church received me and I have been “still becoming Catholic” ever since. Because of the cross-traditional path I’ve taken, the issues of ecumenism are important to me. Equally important to me are issues of apologetics because the rich truth of the Catholic Church is one of the primary things that drew me. Ecumenism, the journey toward unity between Christians, and apologetics, the defense of the doctrines of the Church, might seem to be at odds on the surface but my experience has convinced me that this is not

the case. In this paper, I hope to provide my thoughts on salvation, unity, and truth, and on why good apologetics are essential to successful ecumenism.

### **Salvation and Unity**

Clearly Christ draws some to Him who never enter into unity with His visible Church on earth. The death of my father last year brought home the point that someone can love Christ, without knowing or understanding many of the truths that He teaches through His Catholic Church. That caused me to further explore the relationship between salvation and Church and gave me a better understanding of the truth of the doctrine *extra ecclesiam nulla salus*<sup>2</sup>. People may be saved without formally entering the Catholic Church but they are ultimately saved through the grace that Christ channels through His Church. There are no non-Catholics in Heaven. This is not because they did not die as non-Catholics but because those who were saved were mystically part of the One, Holy, Catholic, and Apostolic Church whether they knew it or not. The Kingdom of Heaven was truly upon them and its first minister, St. Peter, was there to greet them.

Salvation is not primarily about knowledge at all but about the obedience of faith. The Church has unequivocally condemned the argument that one must be Catholic to be saved. But if one can be saved without joining Christ's visible Church on earth, of what use is it to be Catholic? St. Paul answered much the same question in the third chapter of Romans. After making it clear that Gentiles who followed the Law without knowing it were true Jews, he then asked the obvious question: of what use was it to be Jewish before Christ's coming? Or what is the value of circumcision? His answer could easily be our own:

"Much, in every respect. In the first place, they were entrusted with the utterances of God. What if some were unfaithful? Will their infidelity nullify the fidelity of God? Of course not! God must be true, though every human being is a liar, ..." Romans 3:2-3 (NAB)

The *Decree on Ecumenism* answered this question for us in a similar manner:

The brethren divided from us also carry out many of the sacred actions of the Christian religion. Undoubtedly, in ways that vary according to the condition of each church or community, these actions can truly engender a life of grace, and can be rightly described as capable of providing access to the community of salvation . . . It follows that these separated churches and communities, though we believe they suffer from defects already mentioned, have by no means been deprived of significance and importance in the mystery of salvation. For the Spirit of Christ has not refrained from using them as **means of salvation which derive their efficacy from the very fullness of grace and truth entrusted to the Catholic Church.**<sup>3</sup> [emphasis added]

So our answer today is much the same as St. Paul's answer to the Romans. God has entrusted the fullness of His grace and revealed truth to the Catholic Church. This fullness is necessary and through this fullness all that are saved are saved. The fact that some members of His Church have not been faithful does not discredit this truth because God Himself guarantees it.

Furthermore, to willfully and knowingly reject this truth is to reject Christ. Jesus told the apostles that whomever heard them, heard Him and whomever rejected them, rejected Him. *Lumen Gentium* makes clear that "Whosoever, therefore, knowing that the Catholic Church was made necessary by God through Jesus Christ, would refuse to enter her or to remain in her, could not be saved."<sup>4</sup>

### **So Why Unity?**

The reason we worry about unity at all is that Christ tied our unity to the success of our mission. The Church's primary mission is to make disciples of all men and women. Or, as St. Paul described it, to bring about the obedience of faith among all the nations. Jesus, in prayer with the apostles, tied Christian unity to the very mission of the Church.

In John 17, Jesus prayed that Christians should be one with Him and with each other in the same way that Jesus and the Father are one. He linked this unity with the mission of the Church by praying that we would become perfectly one for two reasons: that the world may know that Jesus was sent by the Father, and that the world might know that the Father loves us even as He loved Jesus. Jesus tied the success of His mission, the success of His Church at making disciples among all nations, to the unity of Christians. If we reject unity, we are willingly rejecting His stated will and the success of His mission.

### **True and False Unity**

“Always be prepared to make a defense to any one who calls you to account for the hope that is in you, yet do it with gentleness and reverence;” 1 Peter 3:15b (RSV)

“We must know the truth, and we must love the truth we know, and we must act according to the measure of our love.” --- Thomas Merton<sup>5</sup>

In seeking this visible unity among Christians, we must be careful not to be fooled into a false unity. Disunity is not primarily an intellectual exercise but the result of sin. True ecumenism cannot primarily be achieved through the working out of the intellectual obstacles but through repentance. But this is not to say that the intellectual obstacles can be left in place. They cannot be. All those seeking unity must also be seeking truth because any apparent unity that derives from the sacrifice of truth is a sham. What is the difference between true and false unity?

In one sense, true unity already exists as all who follow Christ are mystically united by the action of the Holy Spirit. This is not a unity that we can sever unless we separate ourselves by sin and apostasy. But it is also not the visible unity that Christ called for at the Last Supper - the type of unity that the world can see and that glorifies God. That

sort of unity is the unity of Acts, of being “in one accord”. It is a visible, strong, unity based on Truth and founded in Love.

We must be careful as we seek this unity to not accept false unity. It would seem that false unity could have two forms: a unity of pretense or a unity by default. A unity of pretense is a false sort of unity in which we whitewash true differences of doctrine. We pretend that we are unified when we are not really of one accord on important questions of truth. This unity sacrifices truth for a certain understanding of love and so misses both. Another sort of false unity is a unity by default. This sort of unity occurs when denominations become so sapped of Truth that they no longer believe the things that once caused disagreement. A unity by default is always possible between people who do not actually believe much of anything. This type of false unity takes place when Truth has already been sacrificed.

Truth cannot be sacrificed for unity but must be presented in love. It does us no good to know everything if we do not have love. But dogma is important, even essential. Those who willingly died over a few sentences of a creed were not misguided as to the importance of that creed. Indeed, those who today view them as zealots or fanatics due to their fervor for the truth are the ones misguided or deluded. As Pope John Paul II stated:

The unity willed by God can be attained only by the adherence of all to the content of revealed faith in its entirety.... A “being together” which betrayed the truth would thus be opposed both to the nature of God who offers his communion and to the need for truth found in the depths of every human heart.<sup>6</sup>

Just as salvation is not primarily about knowledge, successful ecumenism is not primarily about knowledge but about repentance and conversion. But even when everyone approaches this task in a humble and repentant way, numerous intellectual

obstacles remain. It is the job of the apologist to present in love the truth entrusted to the Catholic Church and to assist in the removal of these obstacles. This role is essential to the development of a unity that does not sacrifice truth. With many Christian communities, apologetics even becomes a pre-requisite to ecumenical dialogue.

### **Pre-ecumenical Apologetics**

Many Protestant denominations do not even recognize the Catholic Church as being Christian at all. No talk of unity can take place without even this basic concession. Protestants do not have to recognize that the successor of Peter presides over the Church but they must at least admit that Catholics are part of what they consider to be the Church. When faced with this sort of obstacle, apologetics can clear the way. For much of what they believe about Catholic doctrine is not what the Church actually teaches. I grew up in denominations that always had the Pope on the top ten list for the Antichrist. There is much misunderstanding and downright falsehood out there. Until the bandages are removed, the person's eyes cannot even begin to adjust to the light. Archbishop Fulton Sheen once made the point that many Protestants disagree with what they believe to be Catholic teaching when, in fact, they would agree with real Catholic teaching if it were explained. Apologetics is necessary in this regard to present the real Catholic teaching free from misunderstanding. With those who do not even count Catholics as Christians, it would seem that apologetics must occur before ecumenical dialogue can take place. Beyond this, basic differences in the understanding of "church" itself may hinder dialogue. In fact, the very mechanism for

unity related by Jesus is itself a reason for a careful apologetics that presents the truth in love.

### **The Mechanism for Unity**

In John 17, Jesus described the mechanism for unity as the glory that He passed on to the Apostles from the Father. Earlier in the same chapter, Jesus related this glory to the authority to bring eternal life to all – to fulfill the mission of the Church, to bring about the obedience of faith. But one of the primary issues separating Christians today is the issue of authority itself. The rally cry of Protestantism, *sola scriptura* (scripture alone), became a pickaxe chipping at the heart of the unity of the Church. This doctrine denies the notion that apostolic authority is alive today, not just incorporated in a body of writing. Issues of authority, on the part both leaders and led, caused first one split and then another until today there are thousands of faith communities, each claiming to follow Christ by following only His Word.

Careful apologetics presented in the love of Christ is essential to the removal of this obstacle. Repentant and humble truth-seekers must clear away the obstacles of falsehood and must present the authority of the Church as Christ created it. The leader must be the servant of all.

### **Apologetics and Ecumenical Dialogue**

Christian unity is integral to the mission of the Church. And the success of the Church's mission is imperative for the world. As Thomas Merton stated:

“The only thing that can save the world from complete moral collapse is a spiritual revolution. Christianity, by its very nature, demands such a revolution. If Christians would all live up to what they profess to believe, the revolution would happen.”<sup>7</sup>

Such a radical revolution requires conversion. Conversion because we cannot convict of sin and we cannot bring about the sort of radical repentance or *metanoia* required, only the Holy Spirit can.

But such a radical revolution also requires dialogue. Dialogue puts us in a position to show love. Jesus ate with the Pharisees and if we cannot show that love to our brothers then how can we show it to those who hate us. Dialogue enables us to explain our position and be taken civilly. Within this context, the careful apologist can provide a reason for hope with gentleness and without giving offence. The reason or the hope itself may offend, but the manner of presentation should not. The apologist in dialogue can also find common ground by clearing up places where we only thought that we disagreed and by reminding us that truth is essential to successful unity. Just as good apologetics should come from a life of faith, any ecumenical dialogue should be a trilogue with the Holy Spirit as the third party.

The work of the apologist is not one of arrogance but one of necessity. Truth is essential to the Christian faith. As Dorothy Sayers stated, “The Christian faith is the most exciting drama that ever staggered the imagination of man – and the dogma is the drama.”<sup>8</sup> And as Father McDonnell has affirmed, the claims of the Catholic Church are not arrogance but instead are faith claims that derive from a consistent historical reading of revelation<sup>9</sup> (“Imperial Claims?”, *The Christian Century*). This reading of revelation, these doctrines, should “be presented in a way that makes it understandable to those for whom God himself intends it”<sup>10</sup> and good apologetics is uniquely suited to this divine mission.

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<sup>1</sup> *Ut Unum Sint*, Chapter 1, 15

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- <sup>2</sup> No Salvation outside the Church. Or, as defined by the 4th Lateran Council in 1215: “There is one universal Church of the faithful, outside of which no one at all is saved.”
- <sup>3</sup> *Unitatis Redintegratio* (Decree on Ecumenism, 2<sup>nd</sup> Vatican Council), Chapter 1, 3
- <sup>4</sup> *Lumen Gentium* (Dogmatic Constitution on the Church, 2<sup>nd</sup> Vatican Council), Chapter 1, 14
- <sup>5</sup> Merton, Thomas. *The Ascent to Truth*. Harcourt Brace Jovanovich: San Diego, 1981, p. 8
- <sup>6</sup> *Ut Unum Sint*, Ch. 1, 18
- <sup>7</sup> Merton, Thomas. *The Ascent to Truth*. Harcourt Brace Jovanovich: San Diego, 1981, p. 3
- <sup>8</sup> Sayers, Dorothy. *Creed or Chaos?*. Sophia Institute Press: Manchester, NH. 1974.
- <sup>9</sup> McDonnell, Kilian. “Imperial Claims?”. *The Christian Century*. October 18, 2000.
- <sup>10</sup> *Ut Unum Sint*, Ch. 1, 19