

Pray without ceasing: The importance of prayer for Christian unity

A hundred years ago, in 1908, an Anglican priest, Paul Wattson, began the Octave of Prayer for Christian Unity. January 2008 celebrates the 100th anniversary of this marvelous initiative. Less than 30 years later, Father Paul Couturier began his tireless call for Catholics to commit themselves in depth to this movement of prayer for Christian unity. His theme: Pray for Christian unity “as God wills it and be the means that he wills.”

Among the most beautiful fruits of these persistent calls from Father Couturier is the response from the Trappists of Grottaferrata. In 1937, a first Sister felt called to give her life for Christian unity. In 1938, the booklet for the Week of Prayer for Unity spoke of lives offered for unity at the heart of Anglicanism, Protestantism and Catholicism. Then a second Trappistine from Grottaferrata, Italy, felt called to give her life. “It seems to me that this is what the Lord wants. I feel pushed towards it even when I don’t want to think of it.” Fifteen months later, on April 23, 1939, at the age of 25 years and one month, Maria-Gabriella died with the words, “Thank you,” “Pardon,” “Yes.” The 2008 Week of Prayer for Christian Unity will mark the 25th anniversary of the beatification by Pope John Paul II of Maria-Gabriella of Unity.

It was thus that on April 22, 2001, the Maria-Gabriella Fraternity was born, “a movement of Catholic prayer whose ecumenical vocation it is to allow persons of any state of life or any denomination ... to respond to a call to be united through prayer, in a process of communion and offering ... to witness with one heart to the good news of the Gospel.” The Fraternity also invites “whether by prayer and reading or in a concrete way to discover the Christian life of brothers and sisters of diverse confessional outlooks.” Here in Canada, this form of spiritual ecumenism and, no doubt, others, are alive and bearing fruit.

When we think ecumenism, theological dialogues between Churches and Christian communities as well as common commitment for justice and peace immediately come to mind. Let’s not forget the spiritual ecumenism that sustains them.

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December 2007

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