



Solemnity of Saints Peter and Paul, Apostles

29 June 2014

Dear Sisters and Brothers in Christ,

November 21, 2014, is the 50th anniversary of *Unitatis Redintegratio*, the Decree on Ecumenism by the Second Vatican Council. Its opening paragraph states:

The restoration of unity among all Christians is one of the principal concerns of the Second Vatican Council. Christ the Lord founded one Church and one Church only. However, many Christian communions present themselves ... as the true inheritors of Jesus Christ; all indeed profess to be followers of the Lord but differ in mind and go their different ways, as if Christ himself were divided. Such division openly contradicts the will of Christ, scandalizes the world, and damages the holy cause of preaching the Gospel to every creature.

Half a century later, Christian unity remains a pressing priority. Its motivation and purpose flow unquenched from the prayer of Jesus the night before he gave his life for us: To be faithful to Christ who prayed for our unity, so we may be one as he is one with the Father (John 17.21). The Lord's plea for unity has not been fulfilled in our day. Yet we have made many promising steps forward on the path set before us by the Council. We can joyfully and gratefully say that, with the grace of God, there has been substantial progress in mutual understanding, collaborative support, and common witness over the last half century. In the fall of 1965, just one year after the promulgation of the Decree on Ecumenism, the Bishops of Canada established what is today the Episcopal Commission for Christian Unity, Religious Relations with the Jews, and Interfaith Dialogue. Since then, the Commission has faithfully and energetically pursued three main goals:

- Establishing relations with the national leaders and offices of other Churches and ecclesial communities in our country;
- Being a focal point of information about ecumenical activities in Canada, in order to assist Catholic Bishops and their ecumenical officers;
- Supporting ecumenical activities on a national scale.

Today, this Commission of the Canadian Conference of Catholic Bishops is involved in sponsoring eight formal ecumenical dialogues – with Orthodox, the Polish National Catholic Church, Anglicans, Lutherans, the United Church of Canada, and Evangelical Christians. The dialogues are a forum for reflection and discussion, as well as providing an opportunity to pray together, and to address and understand the issues that still divide us as Christians.

In 1966, our Conference entered into ongoing consultation and collaboration with the Canadian Council of Churches. Since 1998, we have been a full and active member, making ours one of the first Episcopal Conferences in the world to join such a Council. Today, the Canadian Council of Churches has a membership of 25 churches and ecclesial communities, making it the largest ecumenical body in Canada.

Since Vatican II, our Conference, as well as Catholic dioceses and parishes across the country, works in cooperation with other Churches and ecclesial communities on a regular basis – both on one-time projects as well as in ongoing initiatives and coalitions. It is a “given” in our day that Catholic clergy, members of consecrated life, and laity will join in prayer and collaborative efforts, formally and informally, with our Orthodox, Anglican and Protestant brothers and sisters. Over the past decades, our Catholic schools and universities, health centres and social agencies have altered their programs and outreach because of ecumenism. Many of our families today are “ecumenical unions”. Contrary to the situation 50 years ago, it is now rare for an ecumenical presence not to be part of our Catholic celebrations, and often also helping us mark important milestones in our personal lives.

This past half century has witnessed major changes in how Catholics interact with “our separated brethren”. These ecumenical efforts, rooted in Christ’s prayer for unity, are evidence of a generous response to the Council’s Decree. We give thanks to God for these fruitful manifestations of Christian love and solidarity. At the same time, we must also acknowledge that Christians are not yet fully one in Christ. The anniversary of the Vatican II Decree on Christian Unity thus needs to be a moment to encourage new vision and to renew our determination. Our impetus is the living Word of God, who re-creates and challenges us ever anew. Our hope for unity springs from faith in God the Father, who through and in the Holy Spirit continues to plant in Christian hearts the seeds of trust, humility, patience, repentance, and forgiveness. Only these can lead us to unity. Only these can heal the wounds of division and divisiveness.

With the Second Vatican Council, the search for unity opened up new ways to affirm, articulate and proclaim our Christian faith. In its “Celebration, Verification, and Promotion of Vatican II”, the 1985 Extraordinary Synod of Bishops noted how ecumenism has “inscribed itself deeply and indelibly in the consciousness of the Church.” This search for unity is profoundly linked to our faith in Christ. As we celebrate the 50th anniversary of *Unitatis Redintegratio*, we recall the words that Pope Francis shared in the Holy Sepulchre with the Orthodox Ecumenical Patriarch Bartholomew this spring in their recommitment to, and anticipation of, full sacramental unity:

... our disagreements must not frighten us and paralyze our progress. We need to believe that, just as the stone before the tomb was cast aside, so too every obstacle to our full communion will also be removed. This will be a grace of resurrection, of which we can have a foretaste even today. Every time we ask forgiveness of one another for our sins against other Christians, and every time we find the courage to

grant and receive such forgiveness, we experience the resurrection! Every time we put behind us our longstanding prejudices and find the courage to build new fraternal relationships, we confess that Christ is truly risen! Every time we reflect on the future of the Church in the light of her vocation to unity, the dawn of Easter breaks forth!

My brothers and sisters, in communion and solidarity with the Holy Father and my fellow Bishops – each of whom as Bishop is called to be a witness and instrument of unity –, I invite you to give thanks to God for the pursuit of Christian unity. We encourage all of you, according to the opportunities offered in your own walk in life, with your families, communities, parishes and dioceses, to deepen your personal and communal commitment to unity. May the Triune God of love, the model of unity and community, make us all better signs and servants of that unity for which Christ has prayed.

A handwritten signature in black ink, reading "Paul-André Durocher". The signature is written in a cursive style with a cross at the beginning.

+ Paul-André Durocher
Archbishop of Gatineau
President of the Canadian Conference
of Catholic Bishops