

**The Unity of Christians:
The Vision of Paul Couturier**

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**Homily at Westminster Cathedral on the Fiftieth
Anniversary of the Abbé Paul Couturier 1881-1953**

Bishop Alan Hopes, 24th March 2003

In our Mass tonight we have three reasons to be joyful. First we celebrate again the Incarnation of our Lord, whose coming as man was announced to the Virgin Mary over two thousand years ago. Second, we celebrate the dedication of our Cathedral exactly one hundred years ago. And third, we celebrate with love and gratitude the life and work of Paul Couturier who died fifty years ago today.

For most of his life, Paul Couturier was the devout, faithful and good priest in Lyon. Then his life was transformed when he went on retreat to the Monks of Unity in Belgium. The Holy Father had asked these monks to live a monastic life that could reunite the great traditions of the Christian East with those of the Western Catholic world. There he learned of Cardinal Mercier's conversations with Lord Halifax in the 1920s to try to overcome the divisions between Anglicans and Catholics. There he began to understand that Christian disunity was not only a history of human unkindness but that it was also a sin against the goodness of Christ himself. So he surrounded the separations of Christianity with love and the prayer of Christ, through the Mass and the Divine Office.

He wondered how it would be possible to mend these enormous breaches, and to overcome the history of strife and suffering which Christians had inflicted upon each other. He took to heart Mary's response to the angel : '*let it be done to me as you have said*'. Couturier realised that Christian unity could not be a matter of compromise, earthly convenience, or mere amalgamation. Like the coming of Christ as true God and true man, it would come at the right moment, when all things would be possible and when the world could believe. Couturier began to pray to Christ for unity '*according to his will, according to his means*'.

Lyon had become a refuge for thousands of Russians who had fled the Communist Revolution. He discovered that there were vast spiritual riches to be embraced from his new Orthodox friends. He quoted often Metropolitan Platon of Kiev – '*The walls of separation do not reach as far as heaven*'. Couturier grasped that even if our beliefs and cultures and traditions had such different contents, we could still unite in a place beyond this world, close to heaven but free from earthly separation, and there pray ever more closely to the Lord. He called this place without walls 'the invisible monastery' and invited everyone to go there every Thursday night, the night before

Jesus died, and pray again his high priestly prayer – *‘that they may all be one; as you Father, are in me and I in you, that they may also be one in us, so the world might believe that it is you who have sent me’*.

In our prayer and work for an end to the Church's divisions, Christ prays and works with us. Whenever unity is achieved, it is a sign to convince our world that Jesus is Emmanuel, God with us, the Word made flesh, at one with humanity, at one with the Father and the Spirit.

For Couturier, unity is no competition with winners and losers. The search for unity is nothing less than about the nature of God to seek out and save his people, to make them holy as he is holy, to fill them with love and the prayer that alone can overcome our separation and the wounds of centuries.

As people grow in holiness they grow closer to Christ. The path, he realised, would need to be the one, so well known to Mary and her Son: the way of humility, reparation and suffering. Patience, a waiting on Christ's will; perseverance, the will to overcome our pride; the growth in an awareness of each others' history, spirituality, faith and worship - these are the tools which will help us to grow closer together.

Seventy years ago, the Abbé Couturier set in motion the Week of Prayer for the Unity of Christians. For twenty years he gave himself totally to this cause. There have been many fruits of this authentically spiritual quest for a unity with *‘mutually enriching diversity’* (*Catholic Lutheran International Commission*). Since that moment there has been a great flood of prayer which, as Couturier saw, could not be confined in any way.

If the aim is nothing short of the entire union of Christ with all his people, there can be nothing and no one who stands outside the dominion of the Risen Christ. The unity of Christians is the sign of the unity of all humanity whose flesh Christ took for his own. When the Abbé prayed for the sanctification of all Christians, he prayed too for the sanctification of Jews, Moslems, Hindus. He believed that all the peoples of the world would ultimately come to recognise the love of God shown to us in Jesus Christ more than anything else by the friendship of Christians who genuinely love their neighbour, who pray, who love the world, who do justice and walk humbly with their God.

As Catholics, we can take pride that Paul Couturier, the Apostle of Christian Unity, together with the week of Prayer for the Unity of Christians, are a gift in all affection and humility from us to our Christian brothers and sisters. Today, thanks to this man, Christians from all traditions pray together as once the Master taught his disciples. We unite in witness and action, we teach and learn from each other how we might grow in holiness, we rejoice in each other's strengths and stand by each other in our times of need.

As he launched the Week of Prayer fifty years ago, the Abbé Paul Couturier proposed, as the pattern for all who would love to be united with Christ, the Virgin Mary, hearing the call to embrace her Creator in her womb. Therefore I end with his beautiful meditation on Mary, the Mother of Unity in Christ :

Let all Christians come to their Saviour with an open soul,
attentive to the divine call,
in humble abandonment,
the attitude of the humble Virgin Mary.

Her answer to the angel is the archetype
of the creature's response to the Creator:
I am the servant of the Lord. Let it be done to me as you have said.

When the disposition of Christian souls is that of the Virgin,
when the answer of the Virgin Mary resounds silently in our souls,
the souls of all Christians,
this immense, silent cry, guided and dominated by the voice of the Virgin,
will be unfurled before the throne of the Eternal
in a single irresistible supplication.

And once again, by the action of the Holy Spirit, unity will come to pass.

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