

Meditations: Week of Prayer for Christian Unity (Day 4)

Some reflections that can enrich our prayer during the Week of Prayer for Christian Unity (18-25 January).

- The Church is holy in her origin and in her ends
- The struggle for holiness in her members
- The saints are a bond of unity

THE CHURCH was founded by Christ in keeping with the Father's will, and

is constantly assisted by the Holy Spirit. Thus the Church is the result of the ongoing work of the Most Holy Trinity. The second note of the Church, her holiness, is based on this reality: that she comes forth from the Most Blessed Trinity. Pope Francis points out that this awareness of the Church's holiness "is a characteristic that has been present from the beginning in the consciousness of early Christians, who were simply called 'the holy people' (cf. *Acts* 9:13, 32, 41; *Rom* 8:27; *1 Cor* 6:1), because they were certain that it is the action of God, the Holy Spirit who sanctifies the Church."[1]

The Church is holy because she comes from God the Father who is holy. She is holy because Jesus Christ our Lord is holy, and through his sacrifice on the Cross *Christ loved the church and gave himself up for her, that he might sanctify her (Eph* 5:25-26). She is holy because she is

guided by the Holy Spirit, the inexhaustible fount of holiness, who was sent “on the day of Pentecost in order that He might continually sanctify the Church.”[2] We can say, in addition, that the Church is holy because her aim is the glory of God and she seeks our true happiness. And, finally, the Church is holy because the means she uses to attain her end are also holy: the Word of God and the Sacraments.

Although we are convinced of this wonderful reality, we cannot but recognize that, despite her Trinitarian origin and her saving means, the Church’s visible holiness can be hidden beneath the sins of her members. St Josemaría says that Sacred Scripture “applies to Christians the title of *gens sancta* (1 Pet 2:9), *a holy nation, composed of creatures with infirmities. This apparent contradiction marks an aspect of the mystery of the*

Church.”[3] When we consider the beauty of the Church, the Mystical Body of Christ, and all the reasons why she is holy, it can help renew our desire to show forth in our own lives the light of her holiness, in her origin, means and ends.

WE NEED to contemplate the mystery of the Church with the eyes of faith. “It would be a sign of very little maturity,” St Josemaría insisted, “if, in view of the defects and miseries in any of those who belong to the Church (no matter how high they may be placed by virtue of their function), anyone should feel his faith in the Church and in Christ lessened. The Church is not governed by Peter, nor by John, nor by Paul; she is governed by the Holy Spirit, and the Lord has promised that he

will remain at her side always, to the close of the age (*Mt 28:20*).”[4]

It is not surprising that those who are eager to draw close to the Church look to her members, since we are called to embody the joyful message that has been entrusted to us. Often it is we Catholics who have not known how to reflect the holiness of our Mother the Church and we have “concealed rather than revealed the authentic face of God.”[5] Our faith in the Church’s holiness should lead us to ask our Lord insistently for the holiness of each of her members, because we realize how much we need his help. As Pope Benedict XVI said in an ecumenical encounter: our holiness of life must be the heart of the ecumenical movement.[6]

In this light, the defects of the Church’s members – including our own faults and sins – should strengthen our desire for personal

conversion and lead us to make reparation and to pray with greater insistence, while at the same time never forgetting that the Church's holiness resides principally in Christ himself. "The Catholic Church knows that, by virtue of the strength which comes to her from the Spirit, the weaknesses, mediocrity, sins and at times the betrayals of some of her children cannot destroy what God has bestowed on her as part of his plan of grace."[7] Hence, with firm trust in God's plans, St Josemaría reminded us: "Our Mother is holy, because she was born pure and will continue without blemish for all eternity. If at times we are not able to perceive her fair face, let us wipe clean our own eyes. If we are aware that her voice does not please us, let us remove from our ears any hardness which prevents us from hearing in her tone of voice the whistled beckoning of the loving Shepherd."[8]

IT SHOULD FILL US with hope to remember that “throughout history and now as well, there have been so many Catholics who have truly sanctified themselves: young and old, single and married, priests and lay people, men and women. But it happens that the personal sanctity of so many faithful – then and now – is not something externally apparent. Frequently we do not recognize the ordinary people, common and holy, who work and live alongside us.”^[9] Holiness is the most beautiful face of the Church and it shines forth in many people around us: in those who strive to serve and make life more pleasant for those around them; in those who work tirelessly to obtain what is needed for their families; in those who bear powerful witness to the faith by accepting many difficulties, including illness or old age, with serenity. Even though

all these efforts may go unnoticed, they truly bring strength to the Church and also foster unity.

In addition, many Christians have already been beatified or canonized and serve as a stimulus to those of us still on the way. Since we are all part of the one same Church and members of the same Body, this multitude of saints protects and sustains us and guides our steps.[10] Among them we find many who, through divine inspiration, have in different ways helped promote unity among all Christians: St John Henry Newman, who worked to revive a Catholic spirit in the Anglican Church before he converted; St Elizabeth Hesselblad of Sweden, who came from a Lutheran family and reformed the Brigittine Order; St Josephat, a Ukrainian who died striving for the unity of Christians in Slavic lands; Blessed Maria Sagheddu, an Italian Trappist nun,

who offered her life for the unity of Christians and died when only 25, near Rome; St John Paul II, who worked tirelessly for ecumenism during his pontificate; and so many Catholic and non-Catholics martyrs who bore witness to their faith together, as happened in Uganda with the catechist St Charles Lwanga and his companions. Discovering examples of holiness among our separated brethren can give a strong impulse to the quest for unity.

The Second Vatican Council, in its Dogmatic Constitution on the Church, states that the members of the Church, realizing they are called to promote unity, “strive to increase in holiness by conquering sin. And so they turn their eyes to Mary, who shines forth to the whole community of the elect as the model of virtues.”^[11] By loving Mary, *Mater Ecclesiae*, we are led to a greater love for the Church. She will teach us to

feel responsible for the holiness of all the members of Christ's Mystical Body, a necessary path for attaining unity among all Christians.

[1] Pope Francis, General Audience, 2 October 2013.

[2] Second Vatican Council, Dogmatic Constitution *Lumen gentium*, 4.

[3] St Josemaría, *In Love with the Church*, 6.

[4] St Josemaría, *In Love with the Church*, 7.

[5] Second Vatican Council, Pastoral Constitution *Gaudium et spes*, 19.

[6] Cf. Pope Benedict XVI, Address, 19 August 2005.

[7] St John Paul II, Encyclical *Ut unum sint*, 11.

[8] St Josemaría, *In Love with the Church*, 8.

[9] St Josemaría, *In Love with the Church*, 5.

[10] Cf. Pope Benedict XVI, Homily, 24 April 2005.

[11] Second Vatican Council, Dogmatic Constitution *Lumen gentium*, 65.

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