

January 24, 2010

On the night before Jesus died, He prayed at the Last Supper: “I pray for those who will believe in me...that all may be one as you, Father, are in me, and I in you; I pray that they may be one in us, that the world may believe that you sent me” (Jn 21).

On this coming Monday, the Feast of the Conversion of St. Paul, Christians of different denominations and traditions throughout the world will conclude a Week of Prayer for Christian Unity. While this has been a week of intense prayer to the Lord to strengthen our common commitment to full unity, we must keep this intention in our prayers throughout the year.

It is God’s desire that the members of His human family live together in unity and love. It was for this reason that He sent His Son. Jesus suffered, died, and rose that we might all be reconciled with the Father and with one another. Our disunity is contrary to the will of God and is a scandal to non-believers.

In his 1995 encyclical “That All May Be One,” Pope John Paul II wrote: “At the Second Vatican Council, the Catholic Church committed herself irrevocably to following the path of the ecumenical venture...I carry out this duty with the profound conviction that I am obeying the Lord with a clear sense of my own human frailty.”

Pope John Paul II further stated that to believe in Christ means to desire unity, to pray for unity, and to work toward unity of all believers.

The pope stated that prayer is the soul of ecumenical renewal because prayer leads us to change whatever is necessary in our heart and impels us to strive for holiness of life. The pope continued that dialogue is an indispensable step in the pursuit of unity.

I have the opportunity to review the pope's schedule on a daily basis and it is a rare week in which he does not meet with heads of other Christian denominations or leaders of the Jewish, Muslim, and other faiths. On nearly every trip away from the Vatican, the pope takes time to meet with and pray with leaders of other faiths. In the Vatican, the Pontifical Council for Promoting Christian Unity, headed by Cardinal Walter Kasper, has as its responsibility the promotion of international dialogues with leaders of other churches.

In like manner, the U.S. bishops have several ongoing dialogues such as dialogues with the Methodists, Lutherans, Anglicans, Evangelicals, and the Orthodox. I participate in the dialogue between Catholic and Orthodox bishops annually. These dialogues promote mutual understanding, respect, and genuine friendship.

Certainly there are obstacles, difficulties, and even misunderstandings and failures to overcome in our dialogues. Yet, as Pope Benedict XVI, says: "Aware that unity is above all a gift of the Lord, it must be implored with tireless and faithful prayer, escaping our own concerns and addressing ourselves to Jesus."

Using the words of the prophet Ezekiel, Pope Benedict continued: "The Lord wishes all His people to proceed patiently and perseveringly toward the goal of full unity."

Here in Northwest Indiana, parishes have joined with other Christian churches, Jewish synagogues, and Muslim centers for common prayer at special times such as Thanksgiving Day, the remembrance of September 11, 2001, and Martin Luther King Day. They have also worked together on soup kitchens, clothing drives, blood drives, and other endeavors in the service of the needy and to enhance the values of liberty, justice, and peace in our community. These efforts overcome suspicion and build fraternal love and respect.

While the special Week of Prayer for Christian Unity officially ends on Monday, please keep a special place in your heart and in your prayer for the unity of Christians so that one day we will all be one in the Lord as Jesus prayed, and that we will be able to celebrate our genuine unity of faith in one Eucharist. Pray also for greater understanding and unity with members of non-Christian faiths so that we will live together in respect, peace, and love as members of the one human family.