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Discerning the Signs of the Times Today
And the Quest for Christian Unity

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Introduction

Christ is in our midst!

I feel blessed and honored to be invited to deliver the Robert K. Campbell Memorial Lectures on Christian Unity this year. I am honored to be included among those who have delivered these lectures in the past. As I review their names, I rejoice in the fact that I have been blessed to know most of them personally and to benefit greatly from their Christian witness and their devotion to Christian Unity.

I also wish to pay tribute to the devotion and vision of the late Robert K. Campbell. I have learned that he had a special commitment to the cause of Christian reconciliation and common Christian witness in the society. He recognized the important connection between the mission of the Church in the society and the quest for the unity of the churches. May the Lord remember Robert K. Campbell in the Kingdom. And, may we be encouraged by his witness and commitment.

When I received the invitation to deliver the Campbell Memorial Lectures more than a year ago, we had no indication of how so many aspects of our lives would be affected by the events of the past six months. Our lives have been disturbed and shaken by the tragic events of September 11th. Many have lost relatives and friends. These losses have reminded many of other losses, especially the deaths of loved ones. It is still a time for grieving for so many.

All of us have also lost a measure of our sense of security. And if these unprecedented and tragic events were not enough, we have been further shaken by other events. We are pained by the reports of senseless violence in schools, the workplace, and in homes. We are deeply troubled by stories of abuse, especially clergy sexual abuse. We are the daily witnesses to war in Afghanistan and in the Middle East. We are enraged by corrupt and deceptive business practices in some companies, and the greed of some executives.

One story after another seems to numb us. Indeed, the talk of terrorism, war and national security can almost make us forget about the continuing needs of the poor, the homeless, the abused, and the sick that are in our midst.

For many of us, the events of recent months have provided us with new opportunities to reflect upon the direction of our own life and our identity as followers of Jesus Christ. We have also had opportunity to reflect upon the importance of our church communities and our public institutions as well as the direction of our country.

Can we speak about issues of Christian unity and the reconciliation of the churches at times such as these? Yes, we can! Yes, we must!

When we speak about these issues, we are in fact speaking about Jesus Christ and His Gospel of reconciliation. It is the Gospel which declares God's love and our responsibility as Christians and as Church to be bearers of the divine gift of reconciliation. Just as we are called to live as followers of the Lord, the Church is called to be God's sign of healing and reconciliation in the world which is also God's. So long as we are disunited as churches and disunited as Christians our mission is weakened. As we overcome the alienation among Christians and overcome the divisions of the churches, we are giving greater witness to God's reconciling and healing love in the world. Yes, we need to affirm again and again the words of St. Paul:

So if anyone is in Christ, there is a new creation: everything old has passed away; see, everything has become new! All this is from God, who reconciled us to himself through Christ, and has given us the ministry of reconciliation; that is, in Christ God was reconciling the world to himself, not counting their trespasses against them, and entrusting the message of reconciliation to us. So we are ambassadors for Christ, since God is making his appeal through us. (2 Cor. 5:17-20).

The Blessing of God's Holy People

We are gathered here today because of the prayers of others. Over the course of years, decades and centuries, Christian women and men have prayed for the unity of Christ's Church. In their prayers, they have responded to the divine initiative. They have responded to the love of the Father in Christ through the Spirit. They have prayed that divisions be healed, that those who are separated be reconciled. Throughout the ages,

until our own day, these prayers have echoed the prayer of the Lord to the Father, “that they may be one as we are one” (Jn. 17:11).

We can never know the full force of these prayers of God’s faithful people. But, from time to time, we catch a glimpse of their fruits. For their fruits are to be seen where there is an increase of love, a deepening of understanding, a desire to break down divisions, and most importantly a willingness to repent for the sake of the Gospel. The Ecumenical Movement is a movement of prayer, prayer for reconciliation and the restoration of the visible unity of the Church.

We are gathered here today because of the thoughtful teachings of others. In recent decades, Christian women and men have recognized that our divisions have contaminated our Christian teachings. Our studies of the Scripture and the history of the Church have been colored by our partial perspectives. Our separate teachings are not always complementary. Rather, we find that our different teachings reflect the harsh consequences of our divisions. Our concern for particularity often reveals a loss of catholicity. Because of this, faithful Christian women and men have reminded us that together we must proclaim a common faith which binds us together, and which praises God. The Ecumenical Movement is a movement which seeks to affirm the depth and breath of the Apostolic Faith.

We are gathered here today because of the faithful witness of others. Over the decades, faithful Christian women and men have recognized that our divisions weaken the witness of the Gospel of Jesus Christ. They have recognized that the divisions of Christians do not contribute to the healing of society’s wounds. They have come to see that poverty, racism, sexism, and the abuse of the environment have been fostered by our lack of a united Christian witness. These faithful men and women have recognized that together we must witness in a united way in our world. Together we must take seriously our calling to be the salt of the earth and the light of the world. The Ecumenical Movement is a movement for common witness in the world in the name of Christ.

The Ecumenical Movement

One of the most significant characteristics of Christianity in the past 100 years has been the drive towards the reconciliation of Christians and the restoration of the visible unity of the Churches. This drive has been broadly described as the Ecumenical Movement. Since the early years of the 20th century, there has been a profound desire to understand the historic differences between the Christian churches and traditions. There has been a desire to overcome mutual misunderstanding and prejudice. There has been a desire to bear witness together in the society, and to care for the needy together. There has been a desire to pray together for reconciliation and the unity of the churches. There has been a desire to find the means to restore the visible unity of the Christian churches in the profession of the Apostolic Faith and celebrated in the Holy Eucharist.

Clearly, this process of Christian reconciliation is not easy. Especially during the past forty years, the Orthodox Church, the Roman Catholic Church and most Protestant

Churches have made a firm commitment to the quest for reconciliation and the restoration of their visible unity. However, this does not mean that there is full agreement on method and even the expression of this visible unity.

At the same time, not all Christian communities and traditions have been able to commit themselves to the process. There are those sizeable numbers of Protestant communities, especially in the Baptist and the Evangelical traditions, who have generally avoided ecumenical engagement. Many have consciously chosen to avoid cooperation and theological dialogue with other Protestants, as well as with Roman Catholics and Orthodox. The reasons for this avoidance vary.

Let us remember that each of our churches, and even in our particular parish communities have inherited centuries of alienation, antagonism, bitter memories and misunderstandings. Despite the intentions of many to heal the wounds of division, history often weighs heavily upon us. Misunderstandings and prejudices are not easily overcome.

In addition to this, the contemporary divisions among Christians and their churches reflect real, historical differences in Christian teachings. We have inherited different understandings of Christian teachings, which have led to different perspectives on worship, on ministry, on organization and on ethics. Most of us claim to profess faith in the Holy Trinity. We honor God as our heavenly Father. We look to Christ as our Lord and Savior. We seek the guidance of the Spirit. Yet, we know that over the centuries our churches have emphasized differing perspectives in our teachings. Our divided churches have looked at scripture and tradition and have come to dramatically different perspectives. Those of us in this room are not directly responsible for the historic divisions of the churches, but we bear the consequences. The very fact that we cannot join together to celebrate the Holy Eucharist is a continuing expression of our divisions amid our desire for reconciliation.

A Look At History

When we look back upon our common Christian history, we can identify four major divisions which continue to affect us. These four major divisions were not the only ones to afflict the Church of Christ. Indeed, there were a number of serious divisions in the earliest centuries of Christianity, such as the divisions over Arianism, which greatly affected the Church for a considerable time. The four major divisions, which we shall identify, are significant because they continue to affect millions of Christians throughout the world today. While they are rooted in past events and doctrinal debates, each of these divisions has a distinctive story and characteristics.

Firstly, there was a division in the Christian East following the Council of Chalcedon in 451 and subsequent councils Constantinople in 553 and 681. This division was centered upon the question of describing the divine and human natures of Christ, in response to heretical distortions. The division reflected different theological emphasis found in the schools of theological thought in Alexandria and Antioch of the fourth and fifth centuries. Today, this division is usually viewed as one affecting Eastern Christianity. It accounts

for the separation between the family of Eastern Orthodox Churches and the family of Oriental Orthodox Churches.

The second great division was between the Church of Rome and the Orthodox Churches of the East during the Middle Ages. This division centered upon the question of the authority of the Bishop of Rome, and different perspectives upon the person of the Holy Spirit as well as the consequent alteration of the *Nicene Constantinopolitan Creed* in the Western Church.

The third great division to affect Christianity was the division between the Church of Rome and the Churches of the Reformation. These divisions were centered upon questions over the relationship of scripture and tradition, faith and works, ministry and worship, church and state.

And finally, there were a series of divisions in the Protestant world especially throughout from the sixteenth to the eighteenth century. These divisions separated various Protestant churches and traditions from one another. From the early 16th century, Protestantism was divided among at least four major expressions: the Lutheran churches, the Reformed churches, the Anglican churches, and the Free churches. In more recent times, one would also have to take into account the various Pentecostal and Evangelical traditions. From the 16th century onward, the differences among these Protestant churches and traditions have centered primarily over issues of scriptural interpretation. This, in turn, has led to different perspectives on authority, ministry, worship, and morality.

Some Common Features of the Past Divisions

When we look broadly at these great divisions in Christianity, some important common features strike us. These common features remind us that the fundamental doctrinal or theological issues, which were highlighted at the time of division, were part of a wider context. None of the theological issues of divisions can be seen apart from their broader historical context.

Firstly, the divisions took place over the course of time. For convenience sake, we sometimes use the dates 451, 1054, and 1517 when we discuss church divisions. Often, we can associate some important historical events with these dates. However, on closer examination, we see that each of the historic divisions of the churches was part of a gradual process of estrangement. The particular historical event, which we often use to “date” a particular church division, is in fact one among many events which factored into the division. In our study of church divisions, we need to be careful that the “convenient date” of a schism does not obscure reality of the actual historical development of gradual division among churches.

Secondly, the divisions reflect serious disagreement in Christian teaching and theology. The great historic divisions of the churches have occurred because agreement or consensus could not be reached on major theological or doctrinal issues related to the Christian faith. There was a crisis over the interpretation of Scripture and tradition. This

is a fact we cannot deny. At the same time, it is difficult to deny that the breakdown in dialogue frequently led to an imbalance in theological perspective. Whether the issue was Christology or ecclesiology or the relationship between faith and work, the divisions frequently produced a lack of a holistic theological perspective and balance on both sides of the divide. This was reflected in a polemical theology of point and counterpoint, of action and reaction.

Thirdly, these historic divisions did not take place in a social and political vacuum. The theological issues were serious ones. Yet, within the historical context, the theological issues were compounded by the nationalistic, political, and cultural issues of the day. Often theological positions were taken to express political or cultural differences.

Fourthly, the divisions, which developed between churches and traditions, came to be expressed in a very visible manner through worship. As a consequence of divisions, the patterns of worship and liturgical life came to embody and express the separateness and even the distinctiveness of the divided churches. From the earliest days of Christianity, there were common liturgical practices such as the rites of Baptism and the Eucharist, found throughout the church in all places. At the same time, there was a diversity of liturgical customs which reflected different cultures and histories. In the wake of major divisions, however, differences in worship were highlighted as expressions of the divided churches. For example, at one time some asked should the Eucharistic bread be leavened or unleavened, or should the wine be mixed with water? At other times, some asked should infants be baptized or not, should the laity receive communion under the forms of both bread and wine, should icon and statues be used, or should the clergy wear special vestments? Should there be an altar or a communion table? Should the altar, or the baptismal font or the pulpit be the focal point of the church building? Should there be any symbols at all in the worship space? For those unschooled in the subtleties of theological or doctrinal differences, the worship and worship space came to embody the distinctive character of a particular church or tradition. The divisions were expressed in the patterns and style of worship.

Fifthly, the divisions frequently led to subsequent divisions. The unresolved theological issues from earlier discussions frequently reappeared in the subsequent schisms. Indeed, the major church divisions of Europe and the Middle East have been exported to North America, as well as to Africa, the Far East and South America. The “Old World” divisions often provided a basis for additional divisions among Christians in other parts of the world. And, these have led to a proliferation of sects and cults, which frequently have little in common with the historic Christian faith.

Sixthly, these great divisions in the Christianity took on a more or less permanent character by the middle of the 16th century, and this mentality continued for at least 400 years. The great divisions among the churches were seen as normative and acceptable. Some would even claim that they were necessary for the defense of the Christian faith. Prior to the late 1500s, one could find important efforts among the divided churches to examine their differences, and to seek reconciliation. For example, between Orthodox and Catholics, there were the Council of Lyons (1274) and the Council of Florence

(1438). While these councils did not accomplish their purpose and were ultimately rejected by the Orthodox, the meetings were attempts at reconciliation. Let us also remember that the Roman Catholic Council of Trent (1545-1563) began with the intension of healing the Roman Catholic-Protestant division. While the council did not heal the estrangement, it did reflect in its early stages a desire to examine issues of theological and doctrinal differences.

By the middle of 1600s, however, there was very little formal effort among the divided churches to examine and heal their divisions. Indeed, a formal isolation among the divided churches developed. Within the Orthodox Church, the Roman Catholic Church, and most Protestant Churches, divisions came to be accepted as normative. This in tern led to expressions of ecclesiastical exclusivism, polemical theology, missionary conflicts, and proselytism. The divided churches and their theological concerns tended to evolve in isolation but not without mutual antagonism.

Many Church historians now believe that the fundamental theological issues raised at each point of division probably could have been resolved if the atmosphere had not been contaminated not only by polemics but also by politics, as well as polluted by the lack of mutual respect and good will. While not denying the importance of the theological issues raised in each division, there is a sense that the historical context was not conducive to genuine dialogue. Yes, in each of the historical periods there were attempts by many good willed people at dialogue for the sake of reconciliation and unity. However, the good intentions were frequently overshadowed by hostility, fear, and the political agendas of others.

A Paradigm Shift

Today, in nearly every tradition of Christianity, many have come to believe that the historic divisions among the Christian churches can no longer be accepted as normative. In other words, the Ecumenical Movement represents something of a paradigm shift. For hundreds of years, the divided Christian churches had come to accept the reality of divisions. There was a sense of isolation among the divided churches and their peoples, which was frequently supported by political interests and cultural differences.

Yet, today, many believe, quite simply, that our continuing church divisions are scandalous. These divisions compromise the Gospel message of Christ. These divisions divide families. These divisions contribute to divisions among peoples and nations. These divisions impede the mission of the Church in the world. Yes, there is an intimate relationship between our Christian Faith and the Mission of the Church. The questions cannot be avoided: Can we proclaim a God who calls us to reconciliation and unity in Christ ...and at the same time be so divided among ourselves? Can we speak to the world about God's love...and at the same time be so divided among ourselves?

The Paradox of the Contemporary Ecumenical Movement

Some would claim that the Ecumenical Movement is in the midst of a crisis. On the one hand, we can point to a number of remarkable developments in recent years. Most of us have been touched by these developments in the relationships among the churches and the people of the churches. These developments we seem to take for granted. Most of us have become accustomed to many important characteristics of the contemporary Ecumenical Movement.

- We have established opportunities for prayer together for unity and reconciliation which bring together churches and Christians of different traditions.
- We have established numerous formal theological dialogues between Orthodox, Roman Catholics and Protestant churches at the world wide and regional levels. The *Joint Declaration on the Doctrine of Justification* (1999) between Lutherans and Roman Catholics is among the most recent example of the fruits of these dialogues. The earlier Faith and Order studies, *Baptism Eucharist and Ministry* (1982), *Church and World* (1990), and *Confessing the One Faith* (1991) continue to have a profound significance. The more recent study, *The Nature and Purpose of the Church* (1998) deserves greater attention.
- We have established means of bring together churches at both the regional and local levels to work for the care of the needy, the neglected, and the disenfranchised. The outstanding work of the Lehigh County Conference of Churches in these areas is exceptional.
- We have been enriched by translations of the Scriptures done by teams which reflect the various Christian traditions. We have benefited by commentaries on the Scriptures done by biblical scholars from a wide variety of backgrounds.
- We have been enriched by a renewed appreciation of liturgy and worship which reflects ecumenical studies of the early church. There has been in many churches a renewed appreciation of elements of early Eastern Christian spirituality.

On the other hand, we see serious signs of frustration and concern over some directions in the Ecumenical Movement. And, I must say, Orthodox Churches and Orthodox theologians are expressing a good deal of these concerns. Let me give you a few examples.

- Here in the United States, the Orthodox suspended membership in the National Council of Churches of Christ between the years 1991-1992. While the Orthodox are presently participating in some aspects of the NCCC, we are raising questions about its identity and direction as a Council of Churches.
- At the global level, many Orthodox theologians have called into question the identity and direction of the World Council of Churches. The WCC is presently involved in an intense process of self-study related to its own identity and vocation as well as to Orthodox participation.

- In some parts of Eastern Europe and Russia, the Orthodox have been deeply disturbed by the activity of proselytism carried out by Roman Catholic groups in some places and Protestant groups in others.
- And at the local level, Orthodox involvement in ecumenical activities varies greatly from place to place. For the most part, Orthodox are willing to be involved in local ecumenical councils when there is a clear sign that these bodies are committed to the goal of church unity and reconciliation through a common recognition of the Apostolic Faith. (I would add here that the Greek Orthodox Diocese in of Boston recently became a full member of the Massachusetts Council of Churches. This required the Council to alter its constitution and explicitly make reference to faith in the Holy Trinity.)

Two years ago, the Orthodox Bishops in the United States issued an important statement titled: *And the Word Became Flesh and Dwelt Among US...: A Pastoral Letter on the Occasion of the New Millennium*. Within the context of their Letter, the bishops affirmed the importance of the quest for Christian unity. They declared “the involvement of the Orthodox Church in the quest for the reconciliation of Christians and the restoration of the visible unity of the churches is an expression of our faithfulness to the Lord and his Gospel.”

At the same time, the bishops also took note of the difficulties found in the contemporary Ecumenical Movement. The bishops said: “This commitment of the Orthodox to Christian reconciliation does not mean that we approve of every endeavor which is called “ecumenical.” Indeed, we hold that genuine ecumenism must always be rooted in the quest for Christian truth and directed toward a visible unity through which the historic faith of the Church is proclaimed. It must contribute to the salvation of all and give glory to the Lord who calls his disciples to be one so that the world may believe (John 17:21).”

As we gather together today, we are all caught up in the paradox of the contemporary Ecumenical Movement. On the one hand, most of us can join with St. Paul and affirm our faith in “one Lord, one faith and one baptism, one God and Father of all, who is above all and through all and in all. (Eph. 4:4-6)” And, yet on the other hand, we recognize that in a formal sense we are still divided among Orthodox, Roman Catholic and Protestant churches. The most vivid expression of this division is the fact that we cannot all join together today to celebrate the Holy Eucharist. The historic divisions of the churches affect us even now.

The Fundamental Conviction

In the face of the paradox of the Ecumenical Movement today, it seems to me that we must constantly remind ourselves of the fundamental affirmation of the Gospel. We believe in a loving God who is the Source and Goal of reconciliation and unity.

Our Christian faith affirms the Triune God who loves, heals, forgives and reconciles. As the Good Shepherd, Christ has come to break down the barriers caused by sin and to restore us to fellowship with the Father through the Holy Spirit. For this reason the Word of God became flesh and dwelt in our midst. For this reason, Christ identified himself with us his baptism in the Jordan. For this reason, he preached and healed. For this reason, Christ welcomed the repentant sinners and ate with the outcasts. For this reason, he established the Church as a community of faith. For this reason, Christ was crucified and rose victorious over the powers of sin, Satan and death. For this reason, the Christ promised that the Spirit would come as our Comforter and Advocate.

St. John affirmed this truth of divine reconciliation when he boldly declared: “God so loved the world that he gave his only begotten son that all who believe in him will not be lost but have eternal life” (Jn. 3:16). St. Paul reflected this truth when he said: “God was in Christ reconciling the world to himself” (2 Cor. 5:19).

And the great Fathers of the Early Church, such as St. Athanasius, were fond of repeating the adage: “God became human so that we may be made divine” (*On the Incarnation*, 54)

St. Nicholas Cabasilas, the 14th century Orthodox theologian, expresses the Divine reconciliation through Christ with these powerful words:

God pours himself out in an ecstasy of love. He does not remain in the heavens and call to himself the servant he loves. No, he himself descends and searches out for such a servant and comes near and lets his love be seen, as he seeks what is like himself. From those who despise him, he does not depart. He shows no anger towards those who defy him. But, God follows them to their very doors, and endures all things, and even dies, in order to demonstrate his love. (*On the Divine Liturgy*, 2:132)

Our ecumenical vision and our ecumenical activities, therefore, must always be centered in the reality of the Triune God and His divine actions. It seems to me that we are challenged to always affirm that the quest for the unity of Christians and the restoration of the visible unity of the churches is rooted in the very actions of God. Our God is a God of reconciliation who "desires everyone to be saved and to come to the knowledge of the truth" (1Tim. 2:4).

Our message is ultimately Christ and His Gospel. This means that our desire for the unity of the divided churches is not simply a concern reflective of pragmatic or economic interests. It may be true that our church divisions lead to duplications of efforts, competitions, and unnecessary expenditures. Yet, the fundamental impulse toward reconciliation is profoundly theological and rooted in the heart of the Gospel. We are concerned with the unity of the churches because our God is concerned with unity and reconciliation. The Triune God is the Source, the Model and the Goal of our unity and reconciliation.

As followers of Christ, we are called to live a life which bears witness to the reconciling actions of our God. We are called to be "ambassadors of Christ" (2 Cor. 5:20) proclaiming the Gospel of reconciliation in our words and through our deeds, within our parishes, our families, and our society. As churches, we are called to be signs of the unity and reconciliation which God desires for all people. Our concern for the reconciliation of Christians and for the restoration of the visible unity of the churches is ultimately an expression of our devotion to Christ and to His Gospel.

The Challenges Before Us

With this conviction in mind, I would like to raise up three challenges which are related to our quest for Christian unity.

1. Prayer

The first challenge is to pray for the unity of the divided churches and the reconciliation of Christians in one faith and eucharistic fellowship. It seems to me that we must first of all express our deepest desire for Christian unity and reconciliation through our prayers, both our personal prayers and the prayers of our churches.

Many of the oldest prayers, which have been passed down in the Christian tradition, are prayers for Christian unity. One of these Eucharistic prayers is found in a document known as the *Didache* dating from the second century. This prayer says: "As this wheat was scattered over the hills and then when gathered became one, so may your church be gathered from the ends of the earth into your kingdom."

The same theme can be found in the Eucharistic Prayer of the *Liturgy of St. Basil the Great* in the fourth century. This prayer says: "Gather those who have been scattered bring back those who have wandered away, and unite us all in your holy catholic and apostolic church." And further on, the prayer says: "Put an end to the schisms among the churches, stop the raging of the nations and prevent heresy by the power of your spirit. Receive us all into your kingdom as children of light and day, and grant us your peace and your love, O Lord Our God who have given us all things."

Many Orthodox will recall these words for we continue to use the *Liturgy of St. Basil* especially during the Lenten season. For Roman Catholics, the *Fourth Eucharistic Prayer* reflects elements of these earlier prayers when it says: "Lord look upon this sacrifice which you have given to your Church and by your Holy Spirit gather all who share in this one bread and one cup into the one body of Christ, a living sacrifice of praise."

I have always been challenged and intrigued by the petitions of these simple and ancient prayers. They are words of prayer which reflect the prayer of the Lord for the unity of his followers. They are prayers of the Eucharist. Yet, even in the midst of the celebration of the Eucharist, the People of God gathered at a particular place pray for the unity of the church, pray for reconciliation, and pray for the healing of divisions.

There is wisdom in these ancient prayers. They once again remind us of the relationship between our unity as Christians and God's reconciling activity. They also remind us of the utter importance of being people who pray for the unity of the Church and the reconciliation of God's people for the sake of the world, and for the glory of God.

We can not forget that Jesus prayed for the unity of his disciples on the eve of his crucifixion. His prayer for the unity of his disciples was related closely to a petition for their joy, for their victory over the evil one and for the fulfillment of their mission to represent him in the world. The prayer of the Lord continues by relating the unity of his disciples to the Trinitarian unity of the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit (John 17).

Yes, we need to be people who pray and who make the petition for unity a continuing feature of our prayers. Our prayers open us up to the movement of God in our lives and in our churches. Our prayers enable us to acquire the "mind of Christ" (1 Cor. 2:16). Our prayers assist us in cultivating the love and humility and patience which are so essential to Christian reconciliation.

Many of us know that church divisions prevent Christians from the divided churches from joining together in the celebration of the Eucharist. This is a very visible and harsh expression of our division. Yet, our concern for the unity of the churches requires that we must nonetheless find opportunities to pray for the unity of the churches. Our prayer for unity, whether done in our own churches or in ecumenical services, bear witness to our deepest longing and open us up to God's reconciling activity. The reconciliation of the churches must first take place in our hearts and through our prayers.

2. Truth and Unity

The second challenge is the need to affirm the relationship between Christian truth and Christian unity. It seems to me that there is an intimate relationship between the truth of the Christian faith and the unity of the Church. Already in the New Testament period, there was a clear recognition of the need both to maintain the Apostolic Faith with accuracy and to maintain the unity of the church. St. Paul was especially mindful of this relationship. On the one hand, he criticized the divisions among Christians and on the other he admonished them to be faithful the authentic teaching. Writing to the Corinthians, for example, Paul declared that there should be "no divisions in the body" (1 Cor. 12:25). And, in his letter to the Ephesians, Paul called upon them to "maintain the unity of the spirit in the bond of peace. There is one body and one Spirit, just as you were called to the one hope of your calling, one Lord, one Faith, one baptism, one God and father of all, who is above all and through all and in all. (Eph. 4:3-6)"

Throughout the early centuries of the Church, the great Fathers and Mothers, as good and devoted teachers, also recognized the need both to maintain the Apostolic Faith free from distortion and to maintain the unity of the church. As teachers of the Gospel, they recognized that the Apostolic Faith was a guide to salvation. Distortions of the Faith of the Church meant that persons could be misguided in their relationship with God, one

another and the creation. Their salvation was in jeopardy. It does matter what you believe!!!

Likewise, the early Fathers and Mothers recognized that the disunity of the churches was not to be easily tolerated. They expressed a firm desire not only to uphold the Apostolic Faith but also to struggle to overcome divisions among believers. The disunity of those who professed faith in Christ inhibited the Gospel message and weakened the witness of Christians in the world.

In our situation today, it seems to me that we also need to be reminded of the fundamental relationship between the truth of the Apostolic Faith and the unity of the Church. The reconciliation of Christians and the restoration of the visible unity of the divided churches cannot come about through a disregard for the truth of the Apostolic Faith in all its richness and fullness. True Christian unity cannot be founded upon falsehood on a cosmetic agreement, which pretend that there is agreement on essential issues. Let us remember that the historic divisions of Christianity are based upon different understandings of Christian teachings.

Our ecumenical dialogues must examine and, if possible, resolve our differences in teachings. The doctrinal issues which have divided us must be recognized and addressed with courage with thoughtfulness, with prayer, and with an openness to the Spirit. We must truly desire to agree together on the essential elements of the Apostolic Faith, the “faith which was once for all delivered to the saints” (Jude 3).

I am often reminded of St. Paul’s beautiful reference to the breath, length, height and depth of the Mystery of Christ. St. Paul says to the Ephesians: “I pray that you may have the power to comprehend, with all the saints, what is the breath and length and height and depth, and to know the love of Christ which surpasses knowledge, so that you may be filled with all the fullness of God” (Eph.3: 16). There is breath and length and height and depth to the reality of Christ and his Gospel that has at times been obscured by our alienation.

Are we able to see that our historic divisions have wounded our churches? We are somewhat accustomed to emphasizing the positive aspects of Christian divisions. As we look at our separate histories, we tend to stress the fact that Christian separations took place because one group wished to be faithful to the Gospel message. Undoubtedly, there is some truth to this observation. However, we often idealize the past and forget about the political and cultural issues which contributed to our historic divisions, and prevented genuine dialogue. Likewise, we fail to see that our divisions have often led to imbalance in our understanding of the Apostolic Faith.

Let me give you two simple but very important examples: In the Middle Ages, as divisions developed, Roman Catholics emphasized the authority of the Pope as Bishop of Rome while Orthodox emphasized the authority of the ecumenical councils. In the course of time, the two concerns became mutually exclusive in the minds of some. In the

Sixteenth Century, as divisions developed, Roman Catholic emphasized the value of Scripture and tradition, while most Protestants emphasized the value of Scripture alone. Again, over the course of time the proper relationship between both Scripture and tradition was neglected by some.

The unresolved theological debates of the Middle Ages and the Sixteenth Century have genuinely and seriously wounded the life of our churches over the subsequent centuries. Our understanding of the Church and its Scripture, sacraments, ministry, witness, and mission has been narrowed, colored and tainted by the divisive theological debates of the past. The historic divisions of the churches have led, in many cases, to diverse emphases and perspectives in doctrine and ethics, which have not always been complementary. Our divisions have distorted our appreciation of the Apostolic Faith in all its richness and fullness. Each of our divided churches may claim to profess the Apostolic Faith. Yet, our divisions have led to different emphasis and perspectives.

The Ecumenical Movement is, therefore, a movement of healing. We have the opportunity now to examine our church dividing issues in an atmosphere which is more congenial to resolving our differences. We have the opportunity in our present dialogues to assess the past more clearly. We have the opportunity now to distinguish between past perspectives and the present understanding of our churches on critical doctrinal issues.

Again, I would point to the *Agreement on Justification* between the Lutherans and the Roman Catholics as a positive example of the value of contemporary dialogue. This *Agreement* points to the ability of the divided churches to make distinctions between teachings held in the sixteenth century and colored by a highly charged polemical atmosphere, and those expressed today, in a less polemical atmosphere, and with the benefit of ecumenical advances.

At the present time, Orthodox and Roman Catholic theologians in North America are examining the *filioque* question, a point of contention between East and West since the Ninth Century. Indeed, it is a complicated problem reflecting differing approaches to the Holy Trinity and to church authority rooted the early church. It is also a problem compounded by linguistic, historical and cultural differences. Yet, as a result of painstaking study, there is every indication that this dialogue will soon make proposals for the two churches to resolve this difficult issue.

Unity in faith does not require the elimination of all expressions of diversity. In examining the issues of division, we also must recognize that Christian unity does not mean that there must be uniformity in all things. Our vision of united churches, churches in communion with each other, must be one which is open to a rich variety of liturgical practices and theological emphasis which serve and enhance our unity with the Triune God through the life of the church. This diversity can reflect the fact that the one Church of Christ is a worldwide communion of local churches within a wide variety of cultures.

At the same time, however, we need to affirm those beliefs, which unite us, and we need to find way to express our unity in concrete expressions. As one important expression of

unity in liturgical diversity, many churches are advocating greater use of the historic *Nicene-Constantinopolitan Creed*. This ancient Creed is a common inheritance of Orthodox, Catholic and many Protestant churches. It is a creedal statement which precedes our present divisions. It is a creedal statement which reminds us of our unity in time with Christians throughout the ages.

The challenge of reaffirming the relationship of unity and Apostolic Faith also means that we be concerned with the inner renewal of our churches. In the light of the Gospel, we need to be willing to look together at the ways we worship, look together at the ways that we teach, look together at the ways that we exercise authority, look together at the way we engage in mission.

The key to this reexamination is important: We simply can no longer look at issues which affect our particular church without reference to the other churches, and to our rich Christian heritage. Our perspectives on worship, scripture, ministry, doctrine, mission and morality need to be enlightened by our common reflection. Only by looking at these critical issues as churches together will we be able to correct imbalances and enrich our appreciation of the Apostolic Faith. If our divisions have wounded our churches, the process of reconciliation has the ability to enrich us and deepen our understanding of the Gospel and the Church.

Over fifty years ago, the delegates at the First Assembly of the World Council of Churches spoke about the importance of renewal saying: “The greatest contribution that the Church can make to the renewal of the society is for it to be renewed in its own life in faith and obedience to its Lord. Such inner renewal includes a clear grasp of the meaning of the Gospel.” (*WCC Amsterdam Assembly Statement, 1948*)

The process of reconciliation of the churches, therefore, is not merely a matter of good will, although good will is certainly necessary. Genuine and lasting reconciliation requires solid and consistent theological reflection and dialogue. In order for this theological reflection to bear good fruit, it must be rooted in Scripture and tradition, and nurtured by prayer. It must be oriented toward the needs of God's people today. Our reconciliation requires a theology which is truly life-giving and which serves the Author of life.

3. Unity, Mission and Witness

The third challenge is the need to affirm the relationship between the unity of the Churches, and our mission and witness in the society.

Many of us come here today with a profound concern for Christian witness in the society. We see that the lives of many persons have been damaged by discrimination and abuse. We are deeply troubled by the abuse of the young, the elderly, and the sick. We see that the lives of many have been damaged by addictions. We deplore the outbreak of violence in the home, at work, and in schools. And, we believe that the Church and Christians have an obligation to be agents of healing. Many of us come here today with a profound

concern for the Church's mission in our world, especially following the recent terrorist attacks. We see that the message of God's love in Christ needs to be shared with others. As we meditate upon the Gospel, we recognize that Christ is truly the Light of the world and that he has come for the life of the world. His message of salvation is a universal one. The Church of Christ, His Body in the World today, has the obligation to spread the Gospel of salvation to all. As we read the Gospel, we are convinced that Christ calls each of us to be the salt of the earth and the light of the world here and now within the responsibilities and obligations of this life. The Gospel compels us to care for those in need, to comfort those who are sick, and to defend the defenseless.

St John Chrysostom boldly called upon Christian to care for the needy and to be agents of God's love.

So give God the honor which he seeks, that is give generously your money for the poor. God has no need of golden vessels but of golden hearts. I am not saying that you should not give golden altar vessels and so on, but I am insisting that nothing can take the place of charity for the poor. The Lord will not reject the first kind of gift, but He prefers the second... Nothing is colder than a Christian who does not work for the salvation of others. You cannot plead poverty here, for the widow throwing two small coins will embarrass you. Paul was so poor that he was often hungry and lacking the necessary nourishment. You cannot plead humble birth for the Apostles were obscure and from obscure families. You cannot put forward your lack of education, for they were illiterate. You cannot plead weakness for Timothy was one who suffered frequent illnesses. Everyone is able to be of service to his neighbor if only he is willing to do his part. (*Homily 20 on Acts*)

From the earliest days of the contemporary Ecumenical Movement, there has been recognition that our divisions compromise the mission and witness of the Church. The doctrinal conflicts among missionaries in the nineteenth century compelled many to be more concerned with the issues of Christian unity. The tragedy of the First World War and its consequences in Europe compelled many Christian leaders to be among the first to commit themselves to the quest for Christian reconciliation. Over the past decades, many faithful believers have recognized that the divisions of the churches do not contribute to the healing of society's wounds. They have come to see that poverty, racism, sexism, and the abuse of the environment have been fostered by our lack of a united Christian witness. These faithful men and women have recognized that together the churches must witness in a united way in our world. Together the members of the churches we must take seriously their calling to be the salt of the earth and the light of the world (Matt. 5:13).

In recent decades, the movement for the visible unity of the churches has been expressed in greater opportunities for Christians to minister together to those in need. The concern for service in the society in the name of Christ has brought Christian together at the grass roots level. Although we are not fully united in our churches, we have been able to work together in charitable endeavors. We have experienced the profound impact for good

which the churches and their members can make when we work together in the name of Christ in common witness, mission and service.

We cannot ignore the fact that our church divisions compromise our message of the Gospel. How can we speak to the world about peace, unity and reconciliation if we ourselves are not engaged in the process of reconciliation? In his prayer in the garden, Jesus Himself related the unity of his followers to the concern for the salvation of the whole world. He prayed that “they may all be one Father, as you are in me and I in you, that they also may be in us, so that the world may believe that you sent me” (Jn. 17:21).

The degree of cooperation in charitable service and social witness which we have achieved as still divided churches, however, should not be taken for granted and should not be viewed as an end in itself. The degree of cooperation which we have achieved in common witness should not deter us from continuing the quest for Christian unity and the restoration of the visible unity of the churches. The ability to cooperate as divided churches in some endeavors does not mean that there are serious issues of division which still need to be addressed. The harsh fact remains: So long as Christian churches are visibly divided over teaching, their witness as a sign of reconciliation and unity for all is compromised.

Some of the difficulties which the National Council of Churches and the World Council of Churches are experiencing relate directly to this issue. In both these councils, there is a tendency among some to diminish the importance of quest for the visible unity of the churches, and simply to emphasize charitable cooperation and social witness. At the same time, there is a tendency, many believe, to find a basis for social justice concerns which are not necessarily rooted in the Gospel of Christ nor related to the ministry of the churches. If these councils are to be faithful to their fundamental mission to assist the churches in restoring their unity, the unhealthy tendencies must be seen as shortsighted and repudiated.

Throughout this presentation, we have emphasized the fact that the primary goal of the Ecumenical Movement is the restoration of the visible unity of the churches. Prayer for unity, theological reflection on issues of division, and common witness where possible are essential elements in the process of restoring the visible unity of the churches in the Apostolic Faith and one Eucharistic fellowship. The activities of the Ecumenical Movement cannot be seen as a replacement of the activities of the one church. Rather, the essential elements of the Ecumenical Movement seek to assist the churches in healing their wounds of divisions so that, united in one faith, they will better express their common mission in the world. It is important that the proper relationship between the churches and the Ecumenical Movement be affirmed.

Following decades of fruitful theological reflection, on the meaning of visible unity of the churches, the World council of Churches at its Canberra Assembly approved the following comprehensive statement:

The Unity of the Church to which we are called is a *koinonia* expressed in the common confession of the apostolic faith, in a common sacramental life entered by one baptism and celebrated together in one eucharistic fellowship, a common life in which members and ministries are mutually recognized and reconciled, and a common mission witnessing to all people the gospel of God's grace and serving the whole creation. The goal of the search for full communion is realized when all the churches are able to recognize in one another the one, holy, catholic, and apostolic church in its fullness. (*Canberra Assembly Statement*, WCC, 1991)

Conclusions: The Process of Reconciliation

We are called to be concerned about the unity of the churches primarily because of pragmatic or economic reasons. We are concerned about unity because God is! Our God is a God of reconciliation and healing. Christ has come among us to heal us and to reconcile us to the Father through the Spirit. Our concern for the unity of the churches belongs to the very essence of Christianity. The Church of Christ is meant to be a sign of the unity which God intends for all.

The great divisions which afflict Christianity did not occur in a moment. The divisions developed over the course of years and decades. And, these divisions did not take place in a vacuum. Unresolved theological questions were frequently compounded by political, nationalistic, ethnic, and economic factors. Even today, in many places where divisions among the churches appear most acute, it is often difficult to separate the theological differences from the cultural, political, and economic factors.

The movement towards Christian reconciliation and the unity of the churches is also a process. Indeed, it is a process of healing and renewal. It is a process of healing because the wounds of division often run deep. They affect each of us, they affect families, they affect cultures, and they affect societies. They affect nations. Most of us are not directly responsible for the schisms which afflict the churches. But, we have inherited the tragic consequences, even here in the Lehigh Valley. We have inherited memories, prejudices, and misunderstandings which are not easily put aside. These profound spiritual wounds need to be healed. The quest for church unity and reconciliation is also a process of renewal because under the guidance of the Spirit we have the opportunity to look at our churches and our teachings and practices and mission together. And, together we have opportunities to let our growing unity give glory to God.

We certainly need to be attentive to the ways that we approach the issues of Christian division today. The great issues which divide the Christian churches and separate the Christian people need to be addressed in their entirety.

Yet, these issues cannot be addressed without reference to the present as we relate to the Triune God as believers today. We cannot ignore the fact that our prayers for reconciliation have changed many of us. We cannot ignore the fact that our dialogues have changed the relationship between many of our churches, and many of our parishes.

We cannot ignore the fact that our common witness in the name of Christ for the good of others has changed the churches, the local parishes, and the world about us.

The process of Christian reconciliation and the restoration of the visible unity of the churches is not carried out by faceless institutions. Faithful Christians who are responding to the message of the Gospel and the promptings of the Holy Spirit carry it out in their homes, in their parishes, in the society. It is a process which is not always easy. It has its own frustrations. For those of us who are involved in this ministry of reconciliation, we can be strengthened by the fact that we share in the very work of God.

I pray that the Lehigh County Conference of Churches will continue to center its identity on the reconciling actions of God revealed to us in Jesus Christ. You are indeed responding to the call of Jesus Christ.

I pray that the Lehigh County Conferences of Churches will continue to draw the local parishes out of their isolation and into a communion of churches which bears witness to the Gospel in this place and which gives glory to God.

I pray that the Lehigh County Conference of Churches will continue to assist the churches and their people in coming together for prayer, for theological reflection and for common witness.

I pray that the Lehigh County Conference of Churches will continue to be a means through which the life and witness of the local churches are more deeply related to the regional, national and global efforts for Christian unity and reconciliation.

“May the God of steadfastness and encouragement grant you to live in harmony with one another in accordance with Jesus Christ so that together you may with one voice glorify the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ” (Rom. 15:5).

To Him be glory now and forever and unto ages of ages. Amen.