

Together once more: Unity in prayer

Archbishop Gilles Ouellet, formerly the bishop of Rimouski, often spoke of a time growing up in the Eastern Townships of Quebec where he and his father, mayor of the town in which they lived, were attending the funeral of a prominent local Protestant. As they approached the church door, Gilles recalls his father turning to him and saying: “we are doing this because it’s the right thing to do but remember, we don’t pray in this church.” A lot has changed over the last fifty years. There are many instances of Anglican–Roman Catholic common prayer all across this country, with these vignettes being a small sampling:

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*Across Canada Christians gather using the form of prayer initiated by the Taizé community. In many cities and university campuses Taizé draws Anglicans, Catholics and many other Christians together in prayer. As one University of Toronto student who attends ecumenical Taizé prayers has described it, “singing and sitting with these simple words from the Scriptures takes you back behind the divisions between Christians, allowing you to recover a feeling of the basic connection to the same Jesus Christ we all know and love.”*

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*In many parts of Canada, Anglicans and Roman Catholics, together with Christians of other communities,*

*gather to pray together every January during the Week of Prayer for Christian Unity. In 2014, the materials used worldwide for the Week of Prayer were actually prepared in Canada. The Prairie Centre for Ecumenism in Saskatoon and the Canadian Centre for Ecumenism in Montreal were jointly responsible for the preparation of materials, which focused on the importance of Christian communities learning from each other. The theme, ‘Has Christ been divided?’, from 1 Cor. 1:13, presented a challenge to those gathered for prayer, as we grappled with how our divisions undermined our proclamation of the Gospel. While prayer for unity is often a powerful experience, the celebrations in Montreal and Saskatoon that year had a special poignancy, as our own yearnings for the unity Christ wills were given voice the world over.*

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*In 2011, the Anglican–Roman Catholic Dialogue in Canada celebrated 40 years since its formation in the early 1970s. We thought, what better way to mark this occasion than by coming together to pray? A special liturgy for the occasion, adapting the service of evening prayer common to both Catholics (vespers) and Anglicans (as evensong), was developed. We gathered at St. Joseph’s Oratory in Montreal on a November evening, and were lead through a time of celebration and prayer drawing on the participation of several bishops from both communions as well as past and present members of the ARC Canada dialogue. The service included a sign of reaffirmation of our common baptism, thanksgiving prayers quoting passages from the common statements Anglicans and Catholics have made together in dialogue over the last 40 years, and an exchange of tangible gifts between the churches – illuminated Gospels and a 400th anniversary*

*edition of the King James Bible. None of this would have been possible even just a few decades earlier.*

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Many Christians from different churches have been able to participate in various forms of shared prayer. In addition to special ecumenical services, Christians in Canada often pray together during Lent, on Good Friday, at civic occasions, to mark significant national events, or to support one another in times of tragedy. Shared bible studies and prayer groups in neighbouring parishes have become increasingly common. Through local ministerial associations, clergy share in retreats and quiet days. Retreat centres and other institutes that promote spiritual life welcome and are enriched by Christians from a variety of backgrounds. In brief, quoting ARCIC II, “The believer’s pilgrimage in faith is lived out with the support of all the people of God. In Christ, all the faithful, both living and departed, are bound together in a communion of prayer” (SC, 22).



*Ecumenical prayers in the style of Taizé / Credit: Julien Hammond*

At Vatican II, the *Decree on Ecumenism* stated that “there can be no ecumenism worthy of the name without a change of heart” (UR, 7). Prayer for unity, therefore, can be seen as the wellspring of all other forms of ecumenism. It testifies that unity is God’s gift to the Church and a fruit of the spirit of love. Even when prayer is not specifically offered for Christian unity, it actually becomes an expression and confirmation of the unity we seek. Ecumenical prayer is at the service of Christian mission and authentic witness. In his encyclical on ecumenism, *Ut Unum Sint* (UUS) Pope John Paul II highlights the importance of prayer: “If Christians, despite their divisions, can grow ever more united in common prayer around Christ, they will grow in the awareness of how little divides them in comparison to what unites them. If they meet more often and more regularly before Christ in prayer, they will be able to gain the courage to face all the painful human reality of their divisions, and they will find themselves together once more in their community of the Church which Christ constantly builds up in the Holy Spirit, in spite of all weakness and human limitations” (UUS, 22).

Similarly, in an invitation to a season of prayer from Ascension to Pentecost 2017, *Thy Kingdom Come*, Archbishop of Canterbury, Justin Welby noted “Jesus prayed at the Last Supper that we, those who follow him, might ‘be one that the world might believe.’” We are invited to make a lasting difference in our nations and in our world, by responding to his call “to find a deep unity of purpose in prayer.”

*What has been your experience of shared prayer with members of other Christian communities? What have you learned?*

*How could your community celebrate the Week of Prayer for Christian Unity in new and revitalized ways?*

*Are there places where Anglicans and Roman Catholics in your area pray together, and what other opportunities can you imagine?*