

Introduction



All Catholics profess that the Church is "one, holy, catholic, and apostolic." Because the Church itself, the Mystical Body of Christ fashioned by water and the spirit, is a mystery to be received and contemplated in the wisdom which comes from love, the four notes of the Church are also a mystery which we try to understand in wisdom and love. Unity, like holiness, catholicity and apostolicity, is a gift to be sought humbly, to be received gratefully, to be preserved jealously. Unity is never given or possessed once and for all. Unity always risks being compromised or destroyed by our failures to believe fully and love generously. Rejection of what pertains to the essence of Christian faith and wrong thinking about matters pertaining to faith weaken the unity of the believing community. But bitterness and hatred, vindictiveness and betrayal also tear the fabric of unity, diminish or even eliminate altogether the mutual love which Jesus Himself said should characterize His disciples (Jn 13,35). When members of the Church have been separated from each other either because of failures in faith or charity, or both, conversion and reconciliation are necessary to restore unity, to bring brothers and sisters back to the same home and to the same table.

The five authors, one chinese and four persons who wish to be friends of China and of the Church in China, whose essays appear in this issue of TRIPOD dedicated to the theme of "Conversion, Reconciliation and Unity in the Church," consider it a privilege to be invited to write for these pages. We, who try to promote the unity of the Church in the places where we live, respectfully offer our reflections which we hope will provide some inspiration for those who pray, suffer and labor to increase the unity of the Church in China and the communion of the church in China with the Bishop of Rome, the Chief Shepherd, and with the universal Church.

It is impossible, of course, in a few pages to treat all of the questions that could be raised and should be raised at appropriate moments and in suitable places. We humbly submit what we can according to our limited abilities and in the present circumstances. Because the Sacred Scriptures furnish a privileged starting-point of Christian reflection, there is a study on healing and reconciliation in St. Luke's Gospel and another on conversion, reconciliation and unity in St. John's Gospel. In the long history of the Church there are many examples of the eventual healing of serious divisions. An essay on situations of division and separation in the Patristic period shows the various ways in which unity was restored. It should be noted that the term "schism" used in this article is not intended to apply to the contemporary situation in the Church of China.

As we try to understand better the mystery of "Conversion, Reconciliation and Unity in the Church," it may be helpful to ponder a paragraph written by Father David Tracy, one of the leading Catholic theologians in the United States. These words conclude his book, Plurality and Ambiguity. Hermeneutics, Religion, Hope. (San Francisco: Harper and Row, 1987), page 114:

"As for the rest, there is no release for any of us from the conflict of interpretations if we would understand at all. The alternative is not an escape into the transient pleasures of irony or a flight into despair and cynicism. The alternative is not a new kind of innocence or a passivity masking apathy. Whoever fights for hope, fights on behalf of us all. Whoever acts on that hope, acts in a manner worthy of a human being. And whoever so acts, I believe, acts in a manner faintly suggestive of the reality and power of that God in whose image human beings were formed to resist, to think, and to act. The rest is prayer, observance, discipline, conversation, and actions of solidarity-in-hope. Or the rest is silence."

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Feast of the Sacred Heart of Jesus