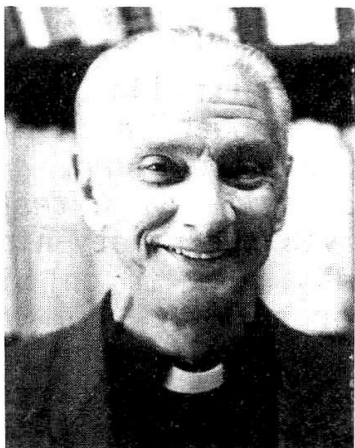


# CONVERSION, RECONCILIATION AND UNITY



## IN ST. JOHN'S GOSPEL

by Edward J. Malatesta

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### The Purpose of the Death and Resurrection of Jesus

The raising of Lazarus from the dead is the last and greatest sign performed by Jesus in the Gospel of St. John. As a result of this wonder, many of the Jews were converted and believed in Jesus (11,45). This fact troubled the religious leaders in Jerusalem. They feared that if Jesus continued to teach and to work miracles, every one would believe in Him; then the Romans would come and destroy both the Temple and the nation (11,47-48). Hearing their fears, Caiaphas, the high priest, rebuked them for their ignorance and proclaimed that it was expedient for them that one man should die for the people; as a result, the nation would not perish. In his view, if Jesus were eliminated, then the people and the nation would be safe. Other leaders agreed with him, and so together they began to plan how Jesus could be killed (11,49-50.53).

St. John reflects upon this discussion and offers an interpretation. The high priest had said more than he realized. Jesus would indeed be killed, but not for a political result, and not only for the Jewish nation, but so that all of God's scattered children would be gathered into one (11,51-52). St. John contemplates the death and resurrection of Jesus as having the power to bring back together all those that sin had divided. In His last public words, Jesus says: "...unless a grain of wheat falls into the earth and dies, it remains alone; but if it dies, it bears much fruit ...I, when I am lifted up from the earth, will draw all people to myself" (12,24.32). In His death, Jesus is like the grain of wheat which falls into the earth. Because long ago He once and for all offered His life as a perfect sacrifice, the Risen Jesus, now present and active everywhere in our

world, is able to purify every person and every group of persons from sin, reconcile persons with God and with each other, unite those who are divided, make one again those who have been separated from each other.

If in the loving providence of the Most Holy Trinity, the Paschal Mystery of Jesus is meant to unite all persons with God and with each other, how much more is this true in regard to the Church, the privileged herald and instrument of salvation, of unity, of eternal life. We can, then with St. John contemplate Jesus as the one who by His death and resurrection converts, reconciles, and unites those who believe in Him.

### The Prayer of Jesus for Unity

Indeed, at the conclusion of the Last Supper, Jesus in His great prayer, which is often called His priestly prayer and which can also be called the prayer of the Mediator of the New Covenant, prayed for the unity of His first disciples (17,11) and of all future believers (17,20-23). He prayed that the world, seeing this unity among His followers, would believe that the Father sent the Son, and loved believers and all people, even as He loved Jesus (17,21.23):

"I do not pray for these only, but also for those who believe in me through their word, that they may all be one; even as you, Father, are in me, and I in you, that they also may be in us, so that the world may believe that you have sent me. The glory which you have given me, I have given to them, that they may be one, even as we are one, I in them and you in me, that they may become perfectly one, so that the world may know that you have sent me and have loved them, even as you have loved me" (17,20-23).

### Love as Source and Sign of Unity

The Paschal Mystery of Jesus, who is turned towards the Father's heart (1,18) and who is one with the Father (10,30), establishes the unity of believers among themselves and their unity in the Father and the Son, because Jesus went to His death out of love for the Father and for all people. "...I do as the Father has commanded me, so that the world may know that I love the Father. Rise, let us go hence [to suffering and death] (14,31)...Greater love has no man than this, to lay down his life for his friends" (15,13). Chapters 13 to 21 of the Fourth Gospel which treat of the Last Supper, the Passion and Resurrection have been aptly called the Book of Glory, because they contain the completion and summit of the revelation which Jesus came into this world to bring. These nine chapters are introduced by a solemn sentence which emphasizes

the faithful love of Jesus for His own: "Now before the feast of the Passover, when Jesus knew that His hour had come to depart out of this world to the Father, having loved His own who were in the world, He loved them to the end" (13,1).

Therefore, it is because Jesus loves His Father and His disciples to the very end of His own life and to perfection (the two meanings of the Greek phrase eis telos), that He enters into that Paschal Mystery which will establish, restore and maintain forever the unity of the Church.

Jesus, the one who loved faithfully to the end, gave as His very own commandment, as His testament to His followers, the teaching that they should love one another just as He loved them (13,34; 15,12.17). This love of the members of the Church for one another is the bright sign of their unity, that unity that will lead the world to believe. If Jesus is the source of conversion, reconciliation and unity for all, from the beginning to the end of human history, because of the love which inspired His death, then His disciples will be mediators, sustainers, restorers of unity to the degree that they too, out of love for God and for others, sacrifice themselves in humble service. They must wash one another's feet, just as Jesus has washed their feet (13,1-20).

In other words, only those who love, as Jesus loved, can be co-artisans of unity with Jesus, the Master Artisan of unity. It is very significant that according to St. John's Gospel, the risen Jesus entrusted His Church to Peter only after he, forgiven sinner, had proclaimed his love for the Jesus he had denied during the Passion (18,17.25-27):

"Simon, son of John, do you love me more than these?"

"Yes, Lord; you know that I love you."

"Feed my lambs. Simon, son of John, do you love me?"

"Yes, Lord; you know that I love you."

"Tend my sheep. Simon, son of John, do you love me?"

"Lord you know everything; you know that I love you."

"Feed my sheep..." (21,15-17).

Love for Jesus means following Him in His way, which is the way of love, and therefore requires an obedience to His commandment of mutual love. In imitation of Jesus, Peter and all who succeed him as chief shepherd of the Church, nourish, preserve, and restore unity especially through love. Similarly, every disciple of the Lord, under the leadership of Peter and following the example of Peter, should assist in building up

the unity of the Church through love.

### Mary Mediatrix of Unity

Mary, the Mother of Jesus, and the Mother of the Church, who is the tender Mother of each follower of Christ, and indeed of all people, appears in St. John's Gospel in only two places, but these are key passages: at the first miracle of Jesus during the wedding feast at Cana and at the foot of the cross just before Jesus dies. The celebration at Cana (2,1-11) symbolizes the marriage of Jesus to the Church, the mystical unity that exists between Him and all His followers. Mary was present to intercede for what the participants in the celebration needed. Her presence was discreet, attentive, trusting, efficacious. Through her prayerful request to Jesus she obtained what was required. She assigned no blame to those who had failed to provide a sufficient quantity of wine, or to those who had not been observant enough to see the need which would have easily embarrassed the young couple on their wedding day. She did not call attention to herself but rather to Jesus and His gift of abundant wine, which enhanced the joy of the celebration of unity.

Similarly, the followers of Jesus promote the unity of the Church first of all by faithful, persistent, trusting prayer to Jesus Himself, who wishes to draw all into union with Himself and with each other. Promoters of unity also encourage everyone, with love and respect, to look upon Jesus, to listen to His words, to do His will. And then, like Mary and like John the Baptist, the friend of the bridegroom, who wished only to decrease so that Jesus might increase (3,29-30), they disappear to allow the bridegroom to speak to the bride.

At the foot of the Cross, Mary the Mother of Jesus became the Mother of the Church and of every believer, the Mediatrix of grace for every person (19,15-27). Together with the beloved disciple, every follower of Jesus is invited to behold her as a Mother. Therefore, all the faithful are fashioned into one body because, in addition to one Spirit, one Lord, one faith, one baptism, and one God and Father (Eph 4,4-5) all have one and the same Mother. Mary was invited to behold the beloved disciple as the representative of all the followers of Jesus, to become their Mother, to love and care for them, as she had loved and cared for Jesus. The true sons and daughters of Mary will willingly choose, in imitation of their Mother, to care, with patience and forbearance, for the well-being of all members of the Church, whatever their condition. Indeed, they will have a special love and attention for those who most need the saving, unifying grace of the crucified

Jesus whom Mary contemplated in His very act of becoming the source of unity. "And I, when I am lifted up from the earth, will draw all people to myself" (12,32).

### Discipleship: Faith in Jesus

The unity which believers in Jesus should have among themselves is a unity grounded in each believer's personal union with Jesus as Lord and Savior of each one and of all. The author of the Fourth Gospel says explicitly that he narrates the signs of Jesus that his book contains so that his readers may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the son of God, and through that faith have life in His name (20,31). One of the characteristics of St. John's Gospel is the encounters which Jesus has with many different individuals. All of these encounters describe the opportunity to believe and to grow in faith given to those whom Jesus meets and engages in dialogue.

Jesus is the Word made flesh (1,14), the Revealer (1,18), the one sent by the Father (3,17), the one who has seen the Father's works (5,19-20), who has received the Father's seal (6,27), who consecrates Himself for His death and resurrection (17,19). He knows what is in each human heart (1,48-50). Sometimes He invites to faith through the signs He accomplishes: the changing of water into wine at Cana (2,1-11); the cure of the nobleman's son (4,43-54); the cure of the sick man at the Pool of Bethesda (5,1-18); the miracle of the loaves (6,1-15); the walking on the water (6,16-21); the cure of the man born blind (9,1-41); the return to life of Lazarus (11,1-54). But in spite of these signs many refuse to believe (3,12; 5,38-47; 6,36.64; 7,5; 8,45; 10,25; 12,37).

Jesus is worthy of belief not only because of the miracles He works, but also because Moses and the Scriptures, John the Baptist, His actions and the Father Himself all bear witness to Him (5,31-47). But most of all it is the very person of Jesus and the words He speaks from heart to heart which draw others into faith and discipleship. The two disciples who answer his invitation "Come and see" (1,35-39); Peter whose name Jesus changed (1,40-42); Nathanael whose heart Jesus read (1,47-51); Nicodemus who learns from Jesus about rebirth through water and the Spirit (3,1-10); the Samaritan woman whose manner of speaking of Jesus progresses from "Jew," through "sir," and "prophet," to "Messiah," (4,9-30); the sick man at the pool who obeys Jesus' word (5,5-9); Peter who recognizes Jesus as the Holy One of God who has the message of eternal life (6,67-68); some of those who listened to His discourse on the light of the world (8,12-30); the blind man whose sight is restored (9,1-17); Martha and Mary whose brother Lazarus Jesus raises from the



dead (11,20-44); many of the Jews who viewed that miracle (11,45): all of these are led to recognize Jesus as one sent by God, to believe in Him, to entrust themselves to Him so that they may receive true life from Him.

### Purification through the Death of Jesus

Jesus is for us the Way, the Truth and the Life (14,6). If we keep our eyes fixed on Him through contemplative prayer, listen attentively to the words He speaks to our hearts, and follow in His footsteps, we shall receive from Him a share in the life which He Himself has received from the Father (5,21-27; 6,57). This gift of eternal life comes to us through the death of Jesus whose cleansing life-giving power touches us through faith and the sacraments of the Church. At the Last Supper, Jesus by the humble gesture of the foot-washing (13,1-15) symbolizes His self-giving unto death which in baptism, penance, and Eucharist will cleanse us all from sin, reconcile us among ourselves, and join us to Himself and to one another in the one community which is the Church. Jesus asks us to wash one another's feet, to encourage each other to continual conversion, more perfect reconciliation, and deeper unity.

### The Mission and Ministry of Reconciliation

On Easter Sunday night, Jesus appears to His frightened disciples who are hiding behind closed doors (20,19-23). He gives them the gift of His peace, shows them His hands and His side. The sight of Him transforms their sorrow and fright into joy. Jesus gives them still other gifts. He gives them a share in His own mission. Because the Father sent Him, He now sends them to continue His own mission. Because the Father sent Him, He now sends them to continue His work of revealing God's love and God's will for all people, of purifying and healing through faith, of reconciling and drawing into unity. To empower them for such a mission He breathes upon them His own Holy Spirit and He entrusts to them the ministry of the forgiveness of sins. The Risen Jesus wishes His Church and each member of the Church to be fashioned in His own image. We are to be icons of Jesus, painted by the Holy Spirit.

### The Pierced Side of Jesus, Source of the Spirit

According to St. John, the culmination of the revelation of God's love which takes place in the person of Jesus crucified, occurs when His side is pierced by the soldier's lance and there flows out blood and water. Jesus is thus the paschal lamb whose bones shall not be broken and the one mourned and contemplated by the very ones who have pierced

Him (19,31-37). The waters of baptism and the bread and wine of the Eucharist have their efficacy in the Church because of the death of Jesus upon the cross. The Holy Spirit dwells within each follower of Jesus to cleanse, reconcile and unite because of Jesus' total gift of Himself (7,37-39). Lifted up and pierced, He draws all to Himself (12,32) and makes all one (11,49-52).

### Branches of the Vine

One of the most splendid mosaics of the Christian tradition is that which covers the upper portion of the apse in St. Clement's Basilica in Rome. At the center of the mosaic is Jesus upon the cross. On the beams of the cross are white doves symbolizing disciples purified and transformed by the death and resurrection of Jesus. From the base of the cross a luxuriant vine spreads its tendrils over the apse. Enclosed within the first tendrils which rise up to the cross are Mary and John, faithful disciples. Each of the other tendrils ends in a flower or fruit. Between the tendrils are the faithful of various conditions and occupations. Inspired by the image of the Vine and the Branches (15,1-17), this inspiring work of art portrays the beauty of the Church which is a unity between Jesus and His disciples. United to Jesus, we will be united with each other and bear fruit in joy for the kingdom of God. In the context of this image, Jesus repeats the special commandment which is His, the sign by which others are to recognize His disciples: "love one another as I have loved you" (15,12.17; 13,34-35).

### The Commandment of Love and the Mystery of Unity

The unity of the church, like the Church itself is a great mystery, and the path to unity is a great mystery understood better in silence than by words. Jesus Himself gave up His life out of love for us, so that we would all be one, as He and the Father are one (17,11.20-23). From the beginning of the Church until our own times countless martyrs have suffered and are still suffering, out of love, to preserve and enhance the unity of the Church. Their isolation nourishes the roots of unity, their silence prepares new proclamations of God's love, their apparent uselessness will flower in new fruitfulness within the body of the Church.

Wherever we are in the world, if we reflect on the teaching of St. John's Gospel, it seems that we will contribute most to the unity of the Church by deepening our personal union with Jesus in faith and by humble, loving service of others. May we allow Jesus to wash our feet so that in our turn we may wash each other's feet. In this way,