

Non-Date, Real Progress

It was my privilege last week June 15-18, 2015 to participate again this year in the Orientale Lumen Conference in Washington, DC. The theme was: The Bishop of Rome: Past, Present and Future.

The Orientale Lumen Conference is a gathering of Catholic, Orthodox (Byzantine) and Eastern Church clergy and lay persons to share, pray and study ecumenical issues in the hope of contributing to the Unity of the Church, the Body of Christ. Each year we have renowned ecumenists of different traditions each present a conference, followed by questions on the topic addressed to a table of the various presenters.

Next year Orientale Lumen will be celebrating its twentieth anniversary at the June 21-24 conference at the Washington Retreat House (walking distance from our Provincial House or 3 minutes by car, depending on the red light!)

Why “non-date”? The Great Schism is often identified with the mutual Roman-Constantinople/ papal-patriarchal excommunications of 1054. The conference historians continuously remind us that the schism as popularly imagined never existed. Among the many proofs is the fact up until the 17th Century Catholic clergy were invited at times by Orthodox hierarchy to minister sacramentally to their faithful.

Many of the theological reasons given for division need no longer divide us. The most difficult question is that of the understanding and exercise of papal primacy. But even there progress is made daily, especially with Pope Francis’ ministry of service and unity. Since, and even before Vatican II, an understanding of Christian unity based on the one body of Christ has become more prominent. Theologies and ideologies are secondary to the Mystical Body – this is not to dismiss them as unimportant but to clarify their importance. Even the triangular description of Church authority, of the unfinished Vatican I Council - with the Pope at the top and all authority descending from him - was already being explained to Bismarck by German bishops trying to correct false interpretations. Since Vatican II, we often consider Church authority as originating in the baptism of all Christians and clerical ministry as service to the faithful.

As we look to the suffering and persecution of all the Christian Churches in the Middle East, we discover a unity among the various Church communities, sharing life, sufferings and joys, faith and hope, love and forgiveness, and, depending on circumstances, buildings, prayers, sacraments. All the Patriarchs of Antioch and all the East have been acting and speaking as one. Two days ago, June 19, our Holy Father Pope Francis received Patriarch Mor Ignatius Aphrem II of the Syrian Orthodox. During his discourse, Pope Francis declared:

The visit of your Holiness strengthens the bonds of friendship and fraternity that unite our Churches, the See of Rome and the See of Antioch. Saint Ignatius, the teacher of unity among the faithful in Christ, in his letter to the Magnesians, echoing the prayer pronounced by Jesus at the Last Supper, prays that there be “one prayer, one supplication, one mind, one hope in charity” to gather “as into one temple of God, as to one altar, as to one Jesus Christ, who coming forth from the one Father has returned to Him united”

And

Yours, Holiness, is a Church of martyrs from the beginning, and it is so today, too, in the Middle East, where it continues to endure, together with other Christian communities and other minorities, the terrible sufferings caused by war, violence, and persecutions. So much suffering! So many innocent victims... This is what animates the witness of the martyrs. The blood of the martyrs is the seed of unity in the Church and the instrument of the building up of the kingdom of God, which is a kingdom of peace and of justice...

And finally

Let us hasten our steps along the common path, keeping our gaze fixed on the day when we will be able to celebrate our belonging to the one Church of Christ around the same altar of Sacrifice and of praise. Let us exchange the treasures of our traditions as spiritual gifts, because that which unites us is much greater than that which divides us.

(http://en.radiovaticana.va/news/2015/06/19/pope_blood_of_martyrs_is_the_seed_of_unity_in_the_church/1152600)