

## **“We saw the star in the east, and we came to worship him.”**

Fr. Don Rooney, January 19, 2022

Welcome, all of you, to Saint Bernadette Church. Thanks to Bishop Burbidge for presiding this evening. We are so glad to welcome all of you to this year’s celebration of the Week of Prayer for Christian Unity. Your presence here tonight speaks louder than any document or agreement. We are strong in these moments when we are present to each other and joined together in prayer.

I’d like to start this evening with excerpts from Vatican News Service’s report of Pope Francis’ homily this week. As usual, his words are simple and clear:

“The Magi reached the goal because they sought it,” “Yet they sought it because the Lord, by the sign of the star, had first set out in search of them.” Like the Magi, we too are sought by God, “and our response must surely be like that of the Magi: a journey together.”

God first set out *in search of them* by placing that star in the sky. It reminds me of Jesus’ words: *it was not you who chose me, it was I who chose you*. There is a contemporary error that claims the proof of one’s faith based on their own personal choice of Jesus as their Lord and savior, which undermines the sense of our being called, together. The emphasis of the “I” who chooses Jesus is the foundation of individualism, which ultimately is the cause of the endless divisions and schisms which characterize Christianity today. The very practice of faith, then, becomes personal expression, not a corporate act.

Ultimately, we are called – all of us together – through the waters of the Jordan to be *a people*. Not a self, or a congregation, or a denomination.

The Holy Father continued, “Those who are touched by God’s grace cannot turn in on themselves and live only for themselves; they are always on the march, always driven to go forward — and to go forward together.” Again, like the Magi, whom tradition represents as representatives of diverse cultures and peoples, Christians today are “challenged to take our brothers

and sisters by the hand... and move forward together.” Pope Francis encouraged Christians to help one another advance “ever closer to God.”

The Pope continues. Some stages are easier, allowing us to “advance rapidly with perseverance,” for example, by works of charity which draw us closer not only to the poor and those in need but also to one another. On the other hand, the journey toward full unity is sometimes more difficult, which “can lead to a certain weariness and temptation to discouragement. He called for courage and patience along the way, in order to encourage and support one another.

“The path to unity is important.” While the work of theologians and specialists is necessary and good, he said, “it is also good that we, God’s faithful people, go on the journey together.”

During the 2021 State LARCUM Conference, Dr. Michael Root spoke about the state of ecumenism today. In many respects, he said, though we may sincerely desire to journey together, it may seem we have lost our way. He gave a few reflections.

First, he said, having come through the Red Sea and into the wilderness the People of God didn’t say, “Well, let’s just live here.” But what exactly do we seek? How do we give witness to the Word of God in and out of season? Maybe for now we must focus on smaller, highly important but local goals and not grow frustrated expecting a great reconciliation.

Second, we must keep our common baptism the central focus. Celebrating baptismal validity validates each other. Our shared imperative is to seek whatever unity is possible. As John Paul II wrote in *Ut unum sint* nearly 30 years ago, the commitment to unity is irrevocable.

Finally, he said we must maintain discomfort and live with the rawness of our separation. We are one in Christ, yet divided at Eucharist. But Eucharist cannot be relegated to something like mere consumer choice: Skippy, or Jif? Creamy, or crunchy?

*How do we give witness to God in and out of season?*

We still have a mutual obligation to care for one another. We must pray for one another *by name*, we must get to know one another so we know *whom we are praying for*. This is a deeper engagement than comes from shared service projects. Once the task is done, we stay in relationship. In this way efforts which come out of local relationships can become more important than what is happening on the national level. If nothing is happening in our neighborhoods, declarations produced by national and international dialogues are irrelevant.

I attended an ecumenical conference in the summer of 2007 at Oberlin College in Oberlin, Ohio. It was the 100<sup>th</sup> anniversary of Faith and Order and the National Council of Churches. Its nickname was “Oberlin II,” after the first Oberlin Conference observing the 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary in 1957. I remember most that temperatures were over 100 and there was no air conditioning in the dorms!

Catholics weren’t invited in 1957, nor would the Catholic Church have allowed Catholics to attend. I remember being told there may have been a couple of Catholic priests, Jesuits, who attended *in cognito*. That simple fact, alone, illustrates how far we have come in the past 60 years, though not as quickly and continuously as most would like recently.

I well remember a paper that was presented at Oberlin II by *Jesuit* Cardinal Avery Dulles shortly before he died, which at the time in my zeal for Christian unity I found very deflating. He praised the work of bilateral dialogues since Vatican II, that such dialogues with Anglicans, Orthodox and Lutherans “have been of immense value for dispelling past prejudices, for identifying real but hitherto unrecognized agreements, and for enabling parties to see that they can say more together than they previously deemed possible.”

However, he said, there is a limit to what the ecumenical methods of the past make possible – in other words, he asked the question if perhaps dialogue has run its course having gone about as far as dialogues can go? But he added a message of hope – which I only rediscovered recently: He added, “It is time now for dialogue in which each Christian community bears witness to the others of those gifts that their community has received from the Lord and holds precious.” He urged “an *ecumenism of enrichment* by means of mutual testimony.”

Dr. Root quoted Saint Thomas Aquinas saying hope is certain – because God is the goal, as well as the One who will get us there. We simply must keep hope alive, together.

*How do we keep our common baptism the central focus, our mutual validation?*

We could discover, together, a deeper understanding and reverence of our common life of baptism. Like the Magi, let us turn back to the East by another route. In the earliest traditions of the churches in Syria, Armenia and Greece of the 4<sup>th</sup> and 5<sup>th</sup> centuries, there was an understanding which I have only discovered recently in the work of the late Benedictine ecumenical scholar, Kilian McDonnell.

They held that the Old Testament didn't end, and the New Testament didn't begin--like the calendar year--with the incarnation and birth of Jesus! In fact, the birth of Jesus was, for them, an event leading up to Jesus' baptism, which was the full manifestation of Christ, the announcement of salvation, and the recreation of the cosmos. Even the epiphany of Jesus to the nations represented by the magi was an event leading up to the full revelation of the Son of God in the Jordan River. The two witnesses testifying to the true identity of the Son, required by Judaic law, were none other than the Father and the Holy Spirit: the Father's voice and the resting of the Holy Spirit in visible form. It was the beginning of the new dispensation of grace. The new order began.

Jesus' baptism is the icon of our incorporation into the life of God, in him all of us are baptized. When the Lord, as man, was washed in the Jordan, it was we who were washed *in him* and *by him*.

The new creation begins when he leaves his cloak of divinity behind in the water, that we might put it on.

Through sin Adam himself became lost and forfeited the robe of glory. To find Adam and restore the robe, divinity itself "puts on Adam" by putting on a body at the Incarnation.

As the new creation, might we look at each another differently as we explore deeper understandings of baptism from a common, ancient

tradition which is an inheritance belonging to all of us? All of us are Adam, unable to do anything about our division and darkness; at the same time all of us are new Adams, recipients of divine glory which none of us did anything to earn or deserve. How much do we acknowledge the cloak of divinity on each other?

*How do we resist reducing our different belonging to something like consumer choice?*

During our work on the ninth round of the national dialogue between the United Methodist Church and the Conference of Catholic Bishops, we were experimenting with writing texts for sacred rites which could be shared. Drawing from the beautiful, various elements of our similar but different rituals, we proposed a Rite of Christian burial as well as a marriage ceremony that would be co-celebrated by United Methodist and Catholic clergy. As long as the rites did not include Eucharist, we thought we would be fine. As it turns out, the work would never be approved for publication, as it would involve so many levels of approval here and at the Vatican, and we've seen how divided the Church is over the reception of liturgical texts at present. Sadly, I don't believe we will see official ecumenical ritual texts in our lifetime.

As clergy we are able to share these celebrations – these especially powerful moments in the lives of interchurch couples and families who are literally living ecumenism every day – but many clergy shy away from blended ecumenical celebrations because there are no official rites to follow. Remember the Lund principle (World Council of Churches Faith and Order Commission, 1952 – 70 years ago!): *churches should act together in all matters except those in which deep differences of conviction compel them to act separately*. When we come together, elements of our liturgical life and community worship should be shared, recognized and honored inclusively.

Ironically, the one thing you might think would be most natural to celebrate together – a shared rite of baptism – proved to be the most frustrating. Though we are all baptized Christian, we are baptized into a particular communion. At the end of the day, it had to be membership in the Methodist church, or membership in the Catholic church.

I challenge all of you to consider only making the choice of *us vs. them* when it is absolutely required, and encourage you, wherever possible, to always include your ecumenical sisters and brothers with invitation and hospitality as completely as we are able. Still, after 70 years this Lund principle has not entered into our DNA as Christians.

Here I come back around to the emphasis on the thou, you, over the I --in our prayer, worship and apostolic life. Remember your Martin Buber: if we objectify God and one another (the I-it relationship rather than the I-thou) the encounter with God or with each other will never be transformative. Our prayer must be about God; everything I do must be about you, and in turn, about God. By defining ourselves and others by our differences and the ownership and entitlement which we can feel for “our” spirituality or worship, we can lose sight that all our prayer, worship and apostolic life is really for God. *It is not about us at all.* As I said earlier, my self-centered perspective is the beginning of division and schism. The authenticity of my prayer, worship and apostolic life is not rooted in my choice of God, but in his universal call for all of us to be holy and blameless, to love God and one another. *It was not you who chose me...* God’s call cannot be claimed by any individual person or church who truly seeks to answer the call at the exclusion of anyone. The theme for this year’s week of Christian unity is “WE have come to worship him.”

Ultimately, we are called – all of us together – through the waters of the Jordan to be a people. Not a self, or a congregation, or a denomination. We wear this cloak of divinity together.

Nothing less than divine life is the basis of our real friendship.

I believe that God, in God’s moment of eternity, is entering our humanity and healing our divisions. God will right our wrongs and bring an end to the conflict which is found today not only between Christian communities, but also the mortal schisms within all of our communions. But there must be a place for God to enter, and our friendships will be the door by which the Holy Spirit will enter and unite us where we are powerless, like Adam, to do anything about it.

The magi: we have seen the star, we have come to worship. We are seekers, and discoverers, and we travel from afar, from distant lands. At Jesus’ time, they might have been Hindu, or Buddhist, perhaps

Zoroastrians -- if they even belonged to a particular religious community. Or they may have just been people who, in friendship, watched for signs in the stars. Have we changed that much? Are we called, like them, to the place of a new birth? I believe so.