



PASTORAL LETTER OF THE MOST REVEREND BERNARD LONGLEY
ARCHBISHOP OF BIRMINGHAM
FOR THE THIRD SUNDAY IN ORDINARY TIME, 21/22 JANUARY 2023

Dear Brothers and Sisters in Christ,

Make up the differences between you instead of disagreeing among yourselves.

The Catholic Church has designated today as Sunday of the Word of God, encouraging us to reflect on the extraordinary gift of the Scriptures. The whole of the Bible, and especially the four Gospels, witnesses to the coming of the eternal Son of God as the Word made flesh in our world. It is our privilege to receive the Scriptures - it is our joy to read and reflect on the Scriptures - and it is our task to share the Scriptures with others as missionary disciples of the Lord.

The Word of God forms us as we listen to the Scriptures together during the Liturgy of the Word at Mass. We are grateful when our priests and deacons share their understanding of the Scriptures and the insights of their experience in the homily, so as to deepen our love of the Word of God and to allow it to influence the pattern of our lives. We believe that the Holy Spirit is at work both in those who preach and in each one of us as we hear and receive the message that is offered.

It is always helpful for the preacher to receive a considered response to his preaching from within the gathered People of God - when a parishioner is moved by the Holy Spirit to respond to what has been offered. Even Pastoral Letters benefit from charitable criticism from time to time - but don't, please, all write at once!

The Word of God gathers us together, uniting us as we listen to its message in the Liturgy - it is the servant of Our Lord who is the gatherer, uniting his holy people in faith. This work of gathering is completed in the Mass as we receive the Body of Christ in the Eucharist. The Holy Communion that we receive transforms us into a people who enjoy a communion of unity with one another. As Catholics we believe that the Eucharist is both a sign and an instrument of our communion, our unity - both making it visible and constantly deepening it and making it fruitful.

As well as being the Sunday of the Word of God, this Sunday also falls within the Octave of Prayer for Christian Unity. At this time of year we remind ourselves of the prayer of Our Lord in St John's Gospel that his followers may all be one. The quest for Christian Unity is not peripheral to our lives as Catholics - it is an intrinsic part of our mission and it lies within the DNA of an authentic Catholic identity.

When we profess our belief, in the Nicene Creed, in one, holy, catholic and apostolic church we are acknowledging the gift of unity which has been entrusted to us in its fulness as Catholics. But we also receive the gift of unity as a task to which we must be committed - to build up our unity with other baptised Christians, with other churches and Christian communities.

Through our baptism, through our shared reverence for the Word of God, and through our mission to evangelise and to serve the needs of others we are already united with other Christians - but while this unity is real it remains incomplete. And while it remains incomplete it undermines the effectiveness of our preaching of the Gospel - it weakens the impact of our work for unity and peace in the world.

St Paul's First Letter to the Corinthians says: make up the differences between you...be united again in your belief and practice. The need to resolve our differences and conflicts reflects our human condition, for we are not yet perfect, but always in need of salvation. If we are to help the world to solve its problems we shall do so more effectively when we can demonstrate our love for one another as Christians and offer a united witness.

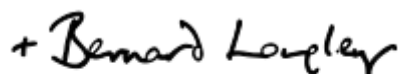
The greatest obstacle to Christian Unity is believing that we don't really need the other churches and Christian communities - that we are fine by ourselves. We believe that the Catholic Church has received the fulness of the means of salvation, entrusted to us by Our Lord - and that we have a corresponding responsibility to make use of them as fully as possible. But we also believe that the Holy Spirit is at work within and through the worship, work and witness of our fellow Christians.

As we continue to walk along the synodal pathway at the invitation of Pope Francis - and as we engage with the diocesan vision, looking for ways of sharing our experience and resources more effectively - we offer thanks for the examples of service and outreach that already witness to our common faith in Christ. The food banks, street pastors, walks of witness and clergy fraternals can lead us from cooperation to commitment and deeper communion.

Please pray with me today for the other churches and Christian communities, and particularly those within our local area - that we may have a heart that is more and more open to the will and prayer of Christ that all may be one.

With my prayers for you as another year unfolds.

Yours devotedly in Christ

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Bernard Longley". The signature is written in a cursive, flowing style.

✠Bernard Longley
Archbishop of Birmingham