

Vatican II and the Year of Faith, Part 4. *Unitatis Redintegratio*:
Removing Barriers to Christian Unity.

In the last few weeks, we have been looking at Scripture and Sacred Tradition in the teaching of the Second Vatican Council. This week, we apply that teaching to the question of Christian unity. The Council Decree *Unitatis Redintegratio* called for a renewed emphasis on Christian unity through respect for our non-Catholic brethren, and also through study of what divides us. One of the most crucial dividing issues is the doctrine on Sacred Scripture.

As Catholics, we understand that Our Lord entrusted the teaching of the faith to the Apostles and their successors. (Matth. 28:16-20) Controversies in the infant Church were settled by appeal to Church councils (Acts 15), the tradition of the Church (2 Thess. 2:15), and the authority of the Pope (Matt. 16:18). Only with time did the Apostles produce writings, and only much later (4th and 5th centuries) were they gathered into a "New Testament."

The Catholic Church has always received these writings with great reverence, but at no time in the Church's history were they seen as an alternative to the authority of the Church. Indeed, since Scripture lends itself to multiple interpretations, the authority of the Church is absolutely necessary to bring unity in doctrine. Authentic interpretation must accord with the mind of the Church, the "Pillar and Ground of the Truth." (1 Tim. 3:15)

This understanding of Church and Scripture was called into question when Martin Luther proposed a novel interpretation of Scripture in the sixteenth century. Church authorities challenged Luther on his interpretation of Scripture, and Luther responded by rejecting the authority of the Church. He proclaimed the sovereignty of his own conscience, and his right to interpret Scripture. Luther had wide appeal in Western Europe, so that in the sixteenth century and beyond, for the first time in history, large portions what had been the Catholic world set up Sacred Scripture as an alternative to the authority of the Church.

Early Protestant writing shows that the Reformers thought this doctrine would actually bring greater unity to the Church. They wanted a greater role for Sacred Scripture in the Church's worship and in life of the faithful. They assumed Scripture's message was clear, and if allowed to stand alone, would obviate final appeals to Popes and councils. The actual result, however, has been otherwise. There are, at present, 41,000 Protestant denominations, and they differ on the interpretation of Scripture in not insignificant ways.

The Council Decree *Unitatis Redintegratio* addressed these dynamics directly. It acknowledged that Protestant devotion to Sacred Scripture is often profound and praiseworthy. Sacred Scripture constitutes an element of sanctification that can bear fruit even outside the visible boundaries of the Catholic Church. Appeal to Sacred Scripture is therefore a potential source of unity between Protestants and Catholics. Still, misunderstanding the relationship of Church and Scripture has abetted centuries of division.

As Catholic evangelists, there are some practical steps we can take to help heal these divisions. I have seen many Protestant Christians eagerly embrace the unity of the Church when they simply

come to understand what Christ and the apostles taught in this matter. Scripture is on our side in this work.

Here are three questions to ask our Protestant neighbors:

- 1) What did Jesus tell us about handing on the Faith?
- 2) Did Christ and the apostles desire visible unity in the Church?
- 3) How can you know when differences over Scripture are worth dividing over?

We have already looked at the first question in weeks past. The Bible itself shows that Jesus established the Apostles, the bishops, their successors, and the liturgy as the primary means for handing on the faith. Nowhere does Christ mention a New Testament or the Bible as the primary source for handing on the faith or settling disputes.

Second, Christ and the apostles clearly desired visible unity in the Church. Paul exhorted the Corinthians to "agree on everything," and allow "no divisions." (1 Corinthians 1:10) Christ prayed to the Father that those who believed through the apostles might be one, "that the world might believe that You have sent me." (John 17:21) And, finally, the apostle John could write, "They went out from us, but they were not of us; for if they had been of us, they would have continued with us." (1 John 2:19)

Third, the history of Protestantism shows that *there can be no principled way* to settle disputes about the Bible, or even to know when those disputes are worth dividing over, without recourse to some principle from outside the Bible. Some Protestants assert the authority of their own creeds and confessions. Others put forth their religious experiences. Some hold to other interpretive theories. But in every case, recourse must be made to a source outside the Bible.

To each of these three questions the Catholic Church offers a clear, objective, and Biblically verifiable answer. Making sure our Protestant friends know the answers to these questions is an important step in furthering Christian unity. We cannot make another person believe, but we can remove barriers to understanding. Still, I have seen many Protestants return to full unity with the Catholic Church when they truthfully engage these questions.

Unitatis Redintegratio called for a renewed emphasis on the unity of all Christians. It acknowledged that we share many elements of grace and sanctification with those outside the visible unity of the Catholic Church, and that those elements can be means of salvation. But it also charged Catholics to "be concerned for their separated brethren, praying for them, keeping them informed about the Church, making the first approaches toward them." Understanding the Church's teaching on Scripture and Tradition is an important first step in that work.