

My Commitment to Christian Unity - Bishop Philip's E-News article for the Week of Prayer for Christian Unity, 2022

Christian Unity is one of my passions. As a parish priest and convenor of the local Churches Together group, I enjoyed learning from Christians in other churches and sharing our Catholic faith with them. That sense of community that I enjoyed in Stockport has been magnified in Portsmouth where I have benefitted hugely from the spiritual relationships that I have developed with other church leaders. We pray together and through our prayers come trust, friendship and the desire to work together.

The late Cardinal Hume once said that Christians “should not do apart that which we can do together” – and this, I believe, should be our default approach to so many of the pastoral issues that face all our communities. Yes, we need to recognise our differences, but there is much that unites us and allows us to work and pray together.

I want us all to be more open to the spiritual gifts that flow from a greater engagement with our fellow Christians. If we are honest, Christian Unity has long been viewed by many Catholics as a bit of a “side-issue” - perhaps because it hasn’t been given the prominence in our parishes that it demands. Yet we have it from the very highest authority that unity is central to the very nature of the Church.

On the night before he died, Jesus prayed for unity amongst his disciples “that they may all be one” – and he linked his prayer to the mission that he had given them, “so that the world may believe” (John 17:21). Vatican II lamented that this unity had fragmented, noting that division among Christian communities “openly contradicts the will of Christ [and] scandalizes the world” and Saint John Paul II in his encyclical *Ut unum sint*, told us that “the quest for Christian unity **is not a matter of choice or expediency, but a duty** which springs from the very nature of the Christian community”.

Introducing the recently issued Ecumenical Vademecum (or “handbook”) entitled “The Bishop and Christian Unity” Cardinal Koch, who heads the department in the Vatican which oversees the Promotion of Christian Unity, says that it is intended to help bishops like me to “better understand and fulfil (our) ecumenical responsibility”. Its key message is to remind the church that: “the bishop cannot consider the promotion of the ecumenical cause as one more task in his varied ministry, one that could and should be deferred in view of other, apparently more important, priorities. The bishop’s ecumenical engagement is not an optional dimension of his ministry but a duty and obligation”.

As you see, Christian Unity isn’t a side-issue after all!