
Ecumenism of Martyrdom

**A homily by the Rev. Salmoon Bashir
For the Week of Prayer for Christian Unity**

In the name of God, Father, Son and Holy Spirit!

On March 15, 2015, three Sundays before Easter, two suicide bombers entered two Churches: St. Joseph Roman Catholic Church and the Anglican congregation of Christ Church. The explosions happened at the same time in Youhanabad, Lahore, my hometown. Both were about two hundred meters away from my home. Tens of people lost their lives, and many families are still suffering from the wounds and aftereffects of this terrible disaster. The number of victims would have been much higher if not for a 20-year-old young man who gave his life by blocking one of the suicide bombers trying to enter St. Joseph Roman Catholic Church. He became an icon of faith and a Christian witness in the face of persecution. His last words were: "I will die but I will not let you go in."

This incident was one of the many attacks of a similar nature that happen to Christian communities in Pakistan every year. And you would think that after experiencing something so horrible, people would not want to come back to church. However, the Sunday after the 2015 attacks, with four layers of security in all the churches in my hometown, even more people came to worship. During the Palm Sunday procession, with or without security, people of faith, young and old, men and women, came to worship. The Pentecostal church in the area opened its doors to Roman Catholic brothers and sisters.

The Brethren church opened the doors for the Anglican congregation and offered hospitality, love, and care for the victims. Those attacks and continuous persecution did not make the faithful people bow down to the powers and principalities of hate, fear, violence, and death. I believe this story is a powerful representation of how we all are united in and through our suffering, irrespective of our denominations and differences. This is the ecumenism of suffering and martyrdom.

This week we are observing a tradition of Week of Prayer for Christian Unity according to Jesus' prayer "that they all may be one." Since 1908, the Church celebrates and observes the Week of Prayer for Christian Unity from January 18 to January 25. The observance of Prayer lasts eight full days. It starts with the feast day of the confession of St. Peter and ends with the feast of the conversion of St. Paul. The two giant pillars of Christianity who had arguments and somewhat opposite views but served Christ in their own ways.

A lot of time, I hear from my friends, colleagues or parishioners what does the word ecumenical mean? Or what is ecumenism? Well, I am glad you also asked today! The word "ecumenical" comes from the Greek Oikouménē, which originally meant "the inhabit world" or "the whole world." Over time, it has taken on specific meanings within Christian contexts, primarily, relating to the unity of Christian Churches.

It refers to efforts aimed at promoting unity and cooperation among different Christian denominations and traditions. For example, the Ecumenical Movement seeks to overcome divisions between Roman Catholic, Orthodox, Protestant, and other Christian denominations. It encourages dialogue, mutual respect, and joint action.

Friends, our Christian unity is grounded in our common baptism: There is one body and one Spirit, just as you were called to the one hope of your calling, one Lord, one faith, one baptism, one God and Father of all, who is above all and through all and in all (Ephesians 128 4:4-6).

In one of his homily Pope Francis urged Christians and called for unity. He referred the term as 'Ecumenism of

martyrdom' He said, "The sufferings endured by Christians in these last decades have made a unique and invaluable contribution to the unity of Christ's disciples," In our time the blood of innumerable Christians has become a seed of unity."

"Ecumenism of suffering and of the martyrdom of blood are a powerful summons to walk the long path of reconciliation between the Churches, by courageously and decisively abandoning ourselves to the working of the Holy Spirit."

The ecumenism of martyrdom and unity can bring out our witness to Christ in many parts of the world, from places where martyrdom might be metaphorical TO places like Pakistan, where it is the everyday reality. My prayer is that like the many witnesses of gospel of Jesus in the early church, like St. Peter and St. Paul bringing their own gifts to unite the body of Christ, we may also be witnesses of lifegiving good news of Jesus Christ and be the fulfilment of Jesus Prayer.

Charles Wesley, a priest in the Church of England, and co-leader with his brother John of the Methodist Church in eighteenth-century England, wrote a hymn, "Blest Be the Dear Uniting Love," This hymn expresses a desire and pray for the Christian unity and the bond of love shared by believers in Christ.

Let me read this for you all this evening. It goes like that.

Blest be the dear uniting love
that will not let us part;
our bodies may far off remove,
we still are one in heart.
We all are one who him receive,
and each with each agree,
in him the One, the Truth we live,
blest point of unity!
Partakers of the Savior's grace,
the same in mind and heart,
nor joy, nor grief, nor time, nor place,
nor life, nor death can part.
Blest be the dear uniting love!

May this bond of love, unity, shared hope, faith, and baptism be fulfilled in accordance with Jesus' prayer, so that the world may come to know and believe in the transformative power of the triune God's love—the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, who are three in one, in perfect unity.
Amen!