



## **Week of Prayer for Christian Unity**

We are in the middle of the Week of Prayer for Christian Unity that runs from January 18 to 25. During these days, Christians from various churches and denominations will gather to pray, engage in Bible studies, and work on social projects together.

We continue to do such activities in 2017—the year marking the 500<sup>th</sup> anniversary of Martin Luther’s beginning of the Protestant Reformation—to move closer to the goal of reconciliation from past hurts and misunderstandings. To quote St Paul, *the love of Christ compels us (2 Corinthians 5:14–20)*.

About fifty years ago, when I began my studies for the priesthood, ecumenical dialogue for Catholics meant creating relationships with the mainline Protestant denominations in Canada. I studied in a consortium of Anglican, Presbyterian, Roman Catholic, and United Church colleges, and later taught in a similar institution. It meant intellectual, spiritual and, pastoral stretching—all of which enriched me.

When I became a bishop, the new challenge was getting to know and understand the evangelical churches that were prospering. Mainline bodies, including Catholicism, were suffering a decline in practice and membership, including losses to these new faith communities.

For many Catholics, evangelical Christians have become their neighbours and even family members. What are Catholics to make of “the Evangelicals”? This is the focus of a 12-page pamphlet prepared by the Episcopal Commission on Christian Unity of the Canadian Conference of Catholic Bishops (CCCB).

“Our Evangelical Neighbours, A Reflection on Evangelical Christianity” sets out to describe this growing body of engaged Christians in a serene and open way. Contact between the two faith communities has increased for several reasons. In some cases, it could be because of circumstances, like intermarriage and workplace friendships. It could be because of common goals, like those of the pro-life movement and poverty relief. Or it could be an intentional answer to God’s call to unity, as various Christians gather for worship (e.g. Taizé), prayer (e.g. Fire and Fusion), and academic dialogue (e.g. The Center for Catholic-Evangelical Dialogue).

The pamphlet candidly acknowledges what continues to divide and befuddle us. For some, the differences remain irreconcilable. For a growing number of us, though, the differences pale in comparison with the history, beliefs, and Saviour we share.

The Bible repeatedly calls us to unity. Indeed, disunity is a major obstacle to the overarching call on the Church to spread the Good News that Jesus paid the price for our sins on the cross. Jesus Himself said that evangelization is only effective when the Church is one as the Trinity is one: *I ask not only on behalf of these, but also on behalf of those who will believe in me through their word, that they may all be one. As you, Father, are in me and I am in you, may they also be in us, so that the world may believe that you*

*have sent me (John 17.22)*. Knowing this, Pope Francis said in November 2015, “There is a time for reconciled diversity. Let us ask for this grace today, the grace of this diversity reconciled in the Lord.”

It is encouraging to see increasing warmth and cooperation across the Church in many areas of faith endeavour. The CCCB and the Evangelical Fellowship of Canada work together to protect conscience rights. We share God’s Word together through the Canadian Bible Society. We do research together at Cardus. We are agents of healing together in the Ancient Paths seminars and at the Holy Spirit Healing Clinic. We evangelize together through Alpha courses and CHRI-FM.

We are getting closer to a reconciled diversity in this Week of Prayer for Christian Unity.