

SHORT WRITINGS FROM TAIZÉ

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Brother François

Is Christ Divided?

An Impossible Question

Aware of the divisions that had come about in the young Church of Corinth, Saint Paul went so far as to ask the question: “Is Christ divided?” (1 Corinthians 1:13). While all professed faith in him, apparently no one wondered what the place of Christ in these divisions was. Believers were organized into different factions, and thus were unaware that he is the same for all, the one and only. They even went to the point of forgetting that he came with the power to unite and to reconcile. Following their logic, could they avoid creating many Christs, each according to a particular taste or

way of thinking? They were in danger of breaking into pieces Someone who is not an idea but a living person. They were subordinating to the practices of the old self the Risen One, the New Man.

Concentric circles

Relations between the Christian Churches are constantly evolving. Before the Second Vatican Council, an almost timeless conception of the state of division prevailed. Other Churches were judged according to categories inherited from the time when the separations had occurred. One of the most important things Pope John XXIII did was simply to invite Christians to reset their clocks. He did not turn to new doctrinal ideas for help but, aided by his kindness and simplicity, he prompted many Christians to change their way of looking at others and not to repeat formulas that no longer corresponded to the reality in which they were living. He was himself a good historian and realized how the present changed what was inherited from the past. And his personality, imbued with the spirit of the Beatitudes, brought about changes that at first were barely perceptible but which ultimately had far-reaching consequences.

Have we gone as far as we can with this new logic? John XXIII used the image of concentric circles. Are we permitted to emphasize the word “concentric”?

The various Churches are generally regarded as circles which are juxtaposed, lying *next* to one another, perhaps with their rims touching or, in extreme cases, partially overlapping.

All the Churches, however, have a common centre, Christ. Should they not therefore learn to see one another differently, as concentric circles, circles that exist *within* each other because of their common centre that cannot be divided? Because of him, Christ, and because of the vital link that each has with him, no Church can be outside of the others. Each one holds the others within itself. Insofar as each comes closer to the centre, it cannot at the same time not come closer to the others and, in this movement towards the centre, the differences can only diminish.

In one of his letters St. Paul speaks of a “law of Christ” which should inspire our Christian life (Galatians 6:2). What was that law of Christ? At his baptism Jesus refused to differentiate himself from other human beings as someone who was more righteous, purer or more innocent. At the decisive moment when he began his public ministry, he stood firmly among those who confessed their sins by asking John to baptize them. He knew that the place he had to take was there, in the waters of the Jordan, in the midst of this crowd of people in need of redemption.

Jesus would henceforth take this place until the very end. Throughout his entire ministry he would never deviate from the road taken at his baptism, even if it would lead to the cross. What word can we use to express Jesus’ way of acting? It was not just to become

our representative before God or to take upon himself, in God's name, human nature and the fate of all humans. No, it was to go as far as possible: he wanted to go to the lowest point of all so as to exclude no one from the communion offered by the Father. He deliberately took the place of the excluded in order to put an end to exclusion itself. I imagine him as acting like a friend: he accomplished an extreme act of friendship to reach the other in his exclusion, to place himself visibly next to that person and so to widen the circle of communion beyond all human prejudices. The right word would be "substitution", provided we understand that in taking our place, Jesus does not take our place *away* from us, but sets himself *beneath* the lowest one of us in order to bring that person too into communion with the Father.

Should not the mystery of substitution be reflected in the relations between the different Churches? Of course, we Christians of the twenty-first century have inherited a division that we did not want. We are not responsible for the breaks that occurred in the past. We were born into this situation. Previous generations sometimes even cultivated oppositions, since the state of division had to be justified over and over again. And this state of division has been widely exported to other cultures and other continents.

How do we see this *de facto* situation today? In a new way? Those who consider themselves as rivals necessarily look at each other from a distance. Can we see from within what motivates the others? If for us Christ is the centre of our Church life and if for Christians

of other traditions he is also central, how then should we look at one another? The circle that we are may lie within another one, or else that other one may be borne by us. The need to differentiate ourselves from other traditions may cause us to move away from the centre which we profess. Different traditions are more than merely complementary or juxtaposed; it may well be that we are interwoven with each other. Because of Christ, who cannot be divided, we are in solidarity with what others have received from him, in solidarity with the life they now live under his inspiration.

No salvation without unity

Before drawing any practical consequences from this vision of concentric circles, we must be clear about how the New Testament authors understood unity in Christ. Why cannot Christ be divided?

Too often the coming of Jesus has been presented as offering only personal salvation: by believing in him each individual receives the forgiveness of sins, release from what holds him or her captive. This presentation is not untrue, but may well be one-sided. Because along with forgiveness, Jesus *offers himself*. By dying and rising he became the firstborn of a reconciled humanity, the starting-point and seed of a new humanity (Colossians 1:18). Those who are set in him by baptism

become from then on a humanity no longer subject to the inevitability of divisions.

By nature we are all, without exception, inclined to rivalry. No human being is immune to it. What Jesus did, by making a total gift of himself on the Cross, was to put to death, at the heart of the human nature we all have in common, the need for opposition that resides in each person. By uniting ourselves with him when we were baptized, we have stripped away what is proper to the “old self”, its whole way of wanting to be more than the others and to make use of divisions for this purpose. All together we are now “one New Humanity”, “one body” (Ephesians 2:15). We do not just proclaim reconciliation. God expects his Church to embody it and make it visible.

The usual presentation of salvation has made Christianity, in the eyes of many people, appear to be a “religion” to meet the needs of individuals. And it is true that there is scarcely a deeper need in the human heart than that of forgiveness. However, anything that touches on social life among Christians was thus reduced to being a mere institutional question or a subject of moral exhortation. Saint Paul’s vision goes deeper, however. At the same depth where forgiveness re-creates us, salvation makes us beings of communion, because it saves us not only inwardly, but draws us closer to God with all the others, breaking isolation and healing wounded relationships.

A brand-new communion is thus part of salvation, a communion that not only gathers those who are eager to come together, but that is received in the place

where Christ re-creates us, at the root of our being. The call to faith that we have heard immediately sets us “in one body” (Colossians 3:15). Christians who would take refuge behind the walls of their individuality have misunderstood the scope of their salvation. Real unity is made possible between humans, the only unity that corresponds to their true dignity.

If in the past Christians have inflicted great harm upon one another, that harm is not limited to incessant controversies or the use of coercion and violence. It lies in the fact that we have allowed division to do its work. Still today we give in too easily to a logic of opposition and we do not let the demands of unity come before every need to justify ourselves.

The prayer of the decisive hour

There is a way to conceive unity according to Saint Paul: the dead and risen Christ contains all humanity within himself. But considering all humans as already gathered together in Christ is not a way of thinking familiar to people today, even if they accept the fundamental unity of the whole human race. Saint John also links the unity of Christians to the passion of Jesus, but he does so in a more dramatic, more existential way.

He does not just say that Jesus “died to gather into unity the scattered children of God” (John 11:51-52). For him unity has its place in the last moments Jesus

spent with his disciples. We can be sure that during this meal Jesus prayed for the unity of those who had been entrusted to him. If, following his usual practice, the evangelist amplified the intention of this prayer, its historical core can still be glimpsed in these words: “Holy Father, keep them [the apostles] in your name that you gave me, so that they may be one as we are one” (John 17:11).

This request is in fact central in the great prayer in chapter 17 of the fourth Gospel. This prayer in its amplified form begins with an evocation of the “glory” common to the Father and the Son (v. 1-5) and ends by setting the future unity of all believers in this same shared glory (v. 20-26). Between these two parts is found what Jesus asks for the apostles, those around him at that time. This section (v. 6-19) also has a concentric structure: the central petition, concerning unity, (v. 11) is framed by two other petitions, both formulated first in negative form: “I do not ask for the world, but for those you have given me” (v. 9) and “I do not ask you to take them out of the world, but to keep them from evil” (v. 15). Before and after these petitions the situation of the apostles is described, what they are keepers of (v. 6-8) and their mission to come (v. 16-19).

We must realize that the time when Jesus prayed this prayer, “the Hour” as John says, was dramatic. Jesus certainly urged his Father to keep the apostles united. He must have had a presentiment that his death would cause them such distress that they might be scattered, each on their own, returning to what at first, because of

him, they had left behind (John 16:32; Mark 14:27). But if they did not stay together, who could then witness? The work that the Father had given him to accomplish (v. 4) would then be engulfed in silence. Nobody would have known anything about it.

Praying for the world had no meaning at that time. It was above all necessary for these few witnesses to remain so united that the tempter (the “Evil One,” v. 15) would have no power over them. Jesus cannot even appeal to the strength of their faith. What has to hold them together is the “name” that the Father gave his Son, that name which is a reality belonging to God, more objective and solid than the human fragility of faith. It could be described as a beam of light coming down from the opening of God’s Heart and constantly reflected in the very being of Jesus. It is in this reality that the apostles must be able to stay together, exactly as the Son remained united to the Father. If that is given to them, then their testimony will be credible.

John suspends the future unity of believers to come (v. 20) on this moment of utter seriousness when Jesus prepared to give his life. Apparently, at that Hour, everything collapsed. But some men just as poor and weak as us were able to remain united because of the prayer of Jesus. And this prayer to God continues to support the unity of Christians down through the ages, for this unity must again and again attest to the uniqueness of the revelation of the Father in his Son and manifest how humans can be united in God.

A tension inherent in unity

The great concern of Jesus' prayer in John 17 is unity, but it also evokes the sending of the apostles (v. 18), their words and the faith that this can awaken (v. 20). Some commentators have thought they could discern Platonic, almost Gnostic, symbolism in this prayer: the unity of the Church would then be considered statically, as if it merely had to reflect the unchanging unity between Father and Son as it exists in heaven. But this is to forget that the unity between Father and Son was affirmed in the earthly mission of Jesus through a struggle, and that it was sustained as a constantly renewed harmony between two wills. The unity of Christians will follow this same pattern: it will be realized in their mission and will always be subject to tensions and trials. Here below it can never be achieved otherwise than through growth, as an approximation of perfect unity (John 17:23). The "glory" that is promised to it, the radiance in love, will only be achieved if Christians make use of all their love to safeguard it.

Two poles must thus remain in tension in our understanding of Christian unity: its model is the communion between the Father and the Son, but it opens itself at the same time to those who must gain access to the faith. It has its full value in itself, because it alone can prove that Jesus' claim to be one with the Father was correct. But at the same time it must be of service; it points beyond itself, for it relates to that

world which, from without, is invited to the knowledge of faith (v. 23).

The New Testament data show that it is not just human imperfections that threaten unity, the inevitable rivalry between individuals and parties. A deep tension runs through the whole body of the Church, coming from the fact that it is intrinsically linked to history, that it has to realize itself through history. It has to demonstrate for "centuries to come" that the grace of God is infinitely rich for all human beings (Ephesians 2:7). Extending over the entire surface of the earth, it must allow all those who are still "far off" to benefit from the peace of Christ (Ephesians 2:17). And during this progress in time and space it will set no condition for belonging to Christ other than the "trusting of faith" alone (Ephesians 3:12). A particular lifestyle, cultural heritage or moral code must never obscure the Gospel and hold back those who seek to come to Christ. Every human being, at any time and place, of whatever culture, must be able to receive the liberating grace of salvation.

That is the tension inherent in Christian unity, not something negative, but a tension that needs to be assumed with lucidity: both to safeguard the unconditional nature of salvation and the highly personal character of faith, and with the utmost care "to keep the unity of the Spirit through the bond of peace" (Ephesians 4:3). It must respect fully the unique path of every human being towards Christ and yet enable this approach to lead to the acknowledgement of "one faith" (Ephesians 4:5) – the faith of the Church

– which for us will always be something received and never tailor-made for one believer in isolation. Or to put it another way: to give priority to the requirement of unity without at the same time forgetting that this unity will constantly have to go beyond itself, since the resurrection of Christ causes his body to “grow” throughout history (Ephesians 4:16).

This growth will inevitably ask unanticipated questions, which will also be questions of truth. In the chapter of the Letter to the Ephesians that I have already quoted several times, St. Paul says we have to “grow towards Christ by witnessing to the truth in love” (4:15). Any growth towards Christ thus means that truth and love are now inseparably joined. Both come closer to one another by approaching the one who is the Head, Christ. In the past, affirming a truth has sometimes given the impression that Christians are dispensed from the requirements of love, as if truth (as it was understood) should normally take precedence over everything else. In fact when truth must be expressed, love must increase even more. To take an example from human relations: it is not saying “yes” which requires the greatest effort of love; explaining a “no” requires much more.

Only a love according to Christ can allow the truth to become transparent and enable people to discover in it what is truly at its heart. How, indeed, can we find words adequate to formulate what it is pointing to without being involved ourselves in this overflowing love that it tries to express? And if, at a given moment, an affirmation a little too extreme concerning what we

thought true was required, love must be able to temper that excess once the danger has passed. For Saint Paul truth and love come together in a context of *growth*, in a vision that is therefore never static.

This tension inherent in unity is already found in the Acts of the Apostles. We see Paul making every effort to ensure that no condition that could raise doubts concerning the free and unconditional nature of Christ’s Gospel be imposed on believers from the pagan world. And another approach of this same apostle is also emphasized: he submits to very specific Jewish customs (21:24) and even goes to the point of risking his life by travelling to Jerusalem (21:11-12) for the sole purpose of demonstrating tangible communion with the mother Church. Because of Christ, Paul has to be “all things to all people” (1 Corinthians 9:22). So if a tension arises, he first has to overcome it within himself.

None of us lives for ourselves

How can we apply the image of concentric circles to present-day reality? Christ has his place in the heart of the life of each Church. We can no longer regard the way other Christians live in his name as being foreign to ourselves. “None of us lives for ourselves... because we belong to Christ” (Romans 14:7-8). Because of Christ, the Christian denominations are never set

side by side. The most precious things they have pass through all of them.

The image of the circle found an excellent application in Saint Dorotheus of Gaza (sixth century): “Suppose that there is a circle drawn on the ground, in other words a circular line drawn with a compass, having a centre. The middle of the circle is in fact called the centre. Imagine that the world is this circle, that God is the centre, and that the radii are the different ways human beings live. When those who wish to come closer to God walk towards the centre of the circle, they come closer to one another at the same time as to God. The closer they come to God, the closer they come to one another. And the closer they come to one another, the closer they come to God.”

The theme of substitution can easily be integrated into the logic of this image: I cannot get closer to God without taking on, ever more closely, what others experience in approaching him and without leaving them room to approach him. Nothing in the lives of others remains indifferent to me. Because of Christ I feel concerned by all that comes from him. For he is the Living One, at work in all those who pray to him.

When Brother Roger expressed so clearly his will to “reconcile within himself the faith of his origins with the mystery of the Catholic faith, without breaking communion with anyone,” did he not enable us to understand that he experienced something which for him was even more evident than the fact of divisions? And when, in the *Letter from Cochabamba*, Brother Alois proposed an “exchange of gifts between the dif-

ferent Christian traditions,” did he not call for a reality which “has already begun”?

I would like to sketch out briefly how the image of the circles might be applied. Of all the Churches, the Catholic Church probably has best achieved that universality which the Christian faith claims as its own. No separation into national Churches has ever taken place within Catholicism. The Petrine ministry, the ministry of the successor of the apostle Peter on the episcopal see of Rome, has maintained a strong cohesion wherever the Catholic Church is found, a cohesion that now extends over the entire surface of the planet. This was done through a specific institutional form, but we must acknowledge that beneath this institutional form there has been, across the centuries, an extraordinary missionary impetus supported by an authentic call to holiness.

Is it possible to ask the Catholic Church now to assume to a greater degree the lives of those who may well have been born outside of her, but who belong to Christ by their faith (baptism) and their desire for visible unity? Can we expect her to take them into account in what she affirms and undertakes and to avoid what could distance them from her or wound them? If she feels a true vocation for universality, does she not sense somewhere in the depths of her being that she carries all these other Christians within her? And when a question of truth arises, is she then ready to go beyond herself in love?

Such a course of conduct requires great selflessness and should never be interpreted as a way to co-opt

Christians of other denominations. Were that the case, we would be going in a direction opposite to that of substitution. That implies, indeed, the refusal to exclude others from the communion we have ourselves received, and even the desire to be given by Christ a responsibility for them, one that sets us beneath rather than above them.

If the Petrine ministry is an obstacle to reunification in the eyes of many, that same ministry also offers to one man an opportunity to assume such an extension of his responsibility. This occurred throughout the pontificate of Pope John XXIII, but also found a precise application when Pope Paul VI, in going to speak to the General Assembly of the United Nations, asked the observers from other Churches present at the Council if he could also say he was speaking on their behalf. Or again in the year 2000, when Pope John Paul II wanted to mark the end of the millennium with a great confession of the sins of the Catholic Church itself. Christians of other churches then envied the audacity of this approach, which apparently only this kind of ministry had the means to achieve.

But what is the contribution of the Churches of the Reformation in this vision of concentric circles? It seems to me that these churches have forcefully recalled one aspect of the New Covenant made by Jesus in his death and resurrection, one that the more institutionalized Churches were often tempted to ignore. For if the New Covenant refers in Scripture to a universal alliance (no longer confined to the people of Israel, but extending to all nations) and one that is unbreak-

able, it also has the new quality of no longer addressing the human partners from without; it will renew them from within. It was clear to the apostles that the gift of the Holy Spirit was henceforth given to all believers. Saint John could say in his first letter (2:20): "You are all knowers." And for Saint Paul every baptized person is called to let themselves "be led by the Spirit" and to trust in the way that Spirit can "bring to life" and "guide" (Galatians 5:16,18,25). All believers share in this highly personal reality. Such inward guidance and knowledge rooted in the heart are not at all reserved for an elite, but open to all believers so as to bear fruit in each one.

This almost "mystical" aspect of the New Covenant is the beauty of Luther's treatise on the freedom of Christians. A call to maturity is addressed to every believer. Everyone has a responsibility and needs to start listening to the Word so that it really permeates his or her life. No one can evade the obligation to become aware of how they act. The requirements contained in the Gospel need to be consented to inwardly, and this is only possible if we constantly receive Christ's forgiveness within ourselves and if we allow a personal communion with him to grow in us, a communion that enables us to say: "What Christ has, the believing soul receives as its own, and what the soul has (its weakness, its sins), Christ considers as his own."

It is not hard to understand that the tension inherent in the aforementioned unity came to light as soon as this latter aspect of the New Covenant was dramatically emphasized. At the time of the Reformation it

became difficult to resist when this tension was put to the test. It caused the Church to lose its unity. Non-theological factors (political, sociological and psychological ones) in turn contributed significantly to this failure. Nonetheless, the reform that was sought at that time should have been accomplished within a larger body. This is being felt again today: the legacy received only becomes really fruitful when set within a wider circle (to come back to the image of concentric circles).

In his *Ethics* Dietrich Bonhoeffer reminded Protestant Christians that it was dangerous to bear in mind only the aspect of the proclamation of the Word, because in that way we would forget what the Church must be *in itself* in order to mean something to the world. Bonhoeffer listed the areas where a loss has been felt: the liturgy, church discipline, personal discipline, and especially the way in which pastoral ministry was envisaged. He himself sensed that it would therefore be much more difficult not to conform to the world, for example in major ethical issues.

When one aspect has been emphasized unilaterally, it tends to become exclusive. And then it is almost inevitable that those who adhere to this particular aspect move away from those who do not follow the same line. They find their strength in this excessive emphasis. By coming closer to the centre, the living Christ, in a more deliberate manner, will we be able to avoid such a fate and allow the isolated aspect to find its true fruitfulness as part of the whole?

I am aware that using the image of concentric circles implies a certain view of the Church, a way of looking which sees beyond its functioning and its words and seeks the presence of Christ in it. It is he who is the very being of the Church. He just does not live in each individual. He himself is the body, the New Man, because he is “all in all” (Colossians 3:11). He is what we are together, just as he is also the foundation of each person’s being. He is the entire vine and we are “branches in him” (John 15:2).

As Brother Roger often reminded us, the same way that we look at human beings (a “mystical” way of looking) is necessary to understand the Church. We need a “mystical” vision, as he said, a vision that the Churches of the Orthodox tradition have probably best kept alive through their liturgical life. In this case, “mystical” does not at all mean a vision which is detached from reality, purely spiritualized, ethereal. The term refers instead to a mystery that is more real than everything else: this concrete, human, fleshly Church is *indwelt* by the presence of the Risen Christ. It has its whole being in him. Thanks to him, it is the place where time is no longer eroded in ephemeral constructions and space no longer scattered in insurmountable estrangements. The determinisms of history no longer have the final word, because from him comes a vital and unifying influx which penetrates it completely. If by his incarnation he took upon himself the extreme diversity of human beings and all their deficiencies, it was in order to constitute at the heart of creation a body forever young where peace reigns.

How, then, can we accept that he remains divided in this body?

Joseph and his brothers

The question has often come up lately: if everywhere people have become aware of the importance of unity, why has so little progress been made in expressing this unity *visibly*? In relations between the Churches there is much more friendship than in the past, but why are there so few concrete steps that reunify what broke apart between Christians? And now the fear is already being heard: standing still means in reality going backwards.

Patriarch Athenagoras of Constantinople (†1972) had thought that if we brought together theologians from all the Churches on an island in the Bosphorus and they were told “you cannot leave until you have achieved unity,” they would have done it. In saying this, he was not denying all the problems that exist; he was merely expressing his conviction that the solution to these problems depends on the urgency we attribute to the requirement of unity.

At the end of the book of Genesis we find the story of the reconciliation of Joseph with his brothers (chapters 37 to 50). A very curious fact cannot help but strike the reader: when these brothers who had wanted to do away with Joseph came to the court of Egypt to

beg for help in the face of the famine that could have caused them to perish, and when they found themselves in front of the governor, unaware that it was Joseph, he was careful not to reveal himself to them. He could have embraced them at once and told them that, in the joy of their reunion, they would no longer dwell on the past. No, with incredible wisdom (the wisdom of Egypt?) he wanted to help them become aware of what really happened.

From his mouth came no word that could condemn them. He did not accuse them; he did not seek vengeance. Very gently, he led them to remember the facts of the past and discover how they had wounded the most basic solidarity, that between brothers. And then one of them, Judah, realized what was at stake: he offered to remain at the court of Egypt “as a slave in place of the child” (Genesis 44:33). Indeed, if the youngest brother, the one who mattered most for the aged father, had to be held as a hostage, as the governor demanded, then the aged father would die. He could not bear to be separated from this child, since in the past he had already lost Joseph, the other son of the same mother. Judah thus went as far as he could: he was ready to take the place of his half-brother, because only such an impulse would demonstrate the sincerity of solidarity. And upon hearing this, Joseph broke down and wept.

Between Christians of different denominations we have already accused one another a great deal of all the evil that we could have done to one another through violence and contempt. But another evil needs to rise

into our consciousness, a deeper evil, at first sight one that is less cruel, but in reality more insidious – the evil of division itself. Naturally there can be no question of postponing opportunities to show affection and mutual collaboration. But are we ready to prove the sincerity of our solidarity by very concrete actions, and thus to give a real urgency to the demand of unity?

© Ateliers et Presses de Taizé, 71250 Taizé, France
DL 1105 — septembre 2009 — ISSN : 2101-731X — ISBN 9782850402937

Achevé d'imprimer en juillet 2009 imprimerie — AB. Doc, 71100 Chalon sur Saône