

REFLECTIONS ON THE WEEK OF PRAYER FOR CHRISTIAN UNITY.

How times, culture, bigotry, prejudice and religious animosity have changed in my lifetime... a personal reflection.

I grew up in a strongly Catholic family, a mixture of two periods of religious persecution: Catholic emancipation, permission to practice your faith openly only emerged in the mid 1800's in England. In Ireland it was more of an economic persecution of Catholics resulting from an English protestant invasion which drove Catholics from their homesteads into abject poverty.

The town I was raised in was strongly Catholic, but it was equally strongly protestant and anti-catholic. We lived in an area far from our local Catholic Church and so there were few Catholic families in our neighbourhood. So as a young boy, other than my older brothers, my choice of a friend in the neighbourhood meant he was a "non-catholic" and this did not please my mother one bit! Two or three houses away from my home was the local Anglican Vicarage – a very large home hidden behind eight foot high stone walls and large Lombardy poplar trees. It was strictly off limits to venture into its gardens, chasing a ball or looking for birds' nests. Then one day when I was about eight years old, a new Vicar and his family took possession. His children were about our age and we were willing to trade the secrets of the neighbourhood for the secrecy hidden behind the walls of their home. To our surprise, the Vicar approved of this 'welcome' to his children and he invited us to attack an overgrown garden that turned out to be a grass tennis court gone to pot. Soon it was a soccer mecca for some of the local kids.

A crisis occurred at Christmas when we were invited to the children's Christmas Party in the local Anglican Hall. This was a period of great hardship after the Second World War and treats were few and far between. Our Mother called upon our Pastor to adjudicate. We were permitted to attend provided we did not take part in any act of worship, such as Grace before meals! Needless to say, our hunger for enjoying a party with food and presents overcame any prejudice on our part. It was the dawn of ecumenism or Christian Unity for me! I was still to be attacked with arrows shot into the spokes of my bike as I cycled through hostile protestant streets on my way to school, or the local grocery store. Even though we looked alike, dressed alike, spoke the same dialect, we were "Catlicks" and they were "Proddy Dogs".

In those days, it was considered to be a "mortal sin" to attend worship in a Protestant Church without special permission from the Pastor.

Seventy years later, I can really say: "How times, culture, prejudice &c" have changed. Today my wife, who is a devout Anglican, and I, attended a service of prayer for Christian Unity in St. Andrew's Catholic Cathedral, Victoria, led by our own Bishop Gary Gordon, and his Anglican counterpart, Bishop Logan. The theme of the Service was "Reconciliation" to prepare us for the 500th Anniversary of the Reformation in Europe. We were called to celebrate God's reconciling grace, to recognise the pain and deep divisions which affect the Christian Church to this day, and urge us to become ambassadors of Christ's message of reconciliation.

As Vincentians, we are well placed to lead all we serve in our ministry of compassionate care, whether they be Christian, agnostic or atheist. We Canadians are called to a special time of Reconciliation with the First Peoples of this great land, many of whom were forcibly removed from their homes and educated by Christian men and women in ways that led to terrible consequences. Christianity was imposed on them with no respect for their traditional ways of reverencing the Creator.

Our Society states in the Rule, #1.4.1.1 that "any person of good will, desirous of living his or her faith by loving and serving the poor and of participating in the meetings and activities of the Society .. may become a Full Member of the Society of St. Vincent de Paul of Canada"

My Anglican wife has been a member of our local Conference for almost 15 years and has actively and fully participated in the work of the Society including local, regional and national meetings. I encourage Conferences to foster the work for Christian Unity both in its ministry and in its membership.

Joe Rigby, member of the Spiritual Committee