

THE
PROMOTION OF TRUE
RELIGIOUS UNITY

Encyclical Letter
(Mortalium animos)

of

His Holiness, Pope Pius XI

Issued January 6, 1928



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Encyclical of Pope Pius XI
on
"True Religious Unity"

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ENCYCLICAL LETTER

The Promotion of True Religious Unity

TO OUR VENERABLE BRETHREN, PATRIARCHS,
PRIMATES, ARCHBISHOPS, BISHOPS AND
TO ALL ORDINARIES IN PEACE AND COM-
MUNION WITH THE APOSTOLIC SEE.

PIUS XI, Pontifex Maximus.

Venerable Brethren: Greetings and Apostolic Benediction:

The will to strengthen and to diffuse for the common good of human society that brotherhood in which we are all closely united by the bonds of a common nature and origin has never perhaps so taken hold of men's minds as in our times.

When nations do not fully enjoy the blessings of peace and old and new discords break forth into mutiny and conflict; when indeed it is impossible to settle the numerous controversies that strike at the peace and prosperity of peoples without the harmonious action of those who govern states and rule and promote their interests, it is easy to understand, and all the more so now that all accept the unity of mankind, how it is that, impelled by the desire for universal brotherhood, many should be anxious that the various nations stand ever more closely together.

Some seek to accomplish a thing not unlike this in matters that concern the ordinances of the New Law which Christ brought to us. Convinced that rarely indeed do men lack all sense of religion, they seem to draw from this reason to hope that without great difficulty it may come about that all peoples, no matter how different their reli-

gions, will stand fraternally together in the profession of a few doctrines which will serve as a kind of common foundation for the spiritual life.

Therefore they are accustomed to call congresses, reunions and meetings which are attended by many and they invite there indiscriminately, to decide the question, infidels of all kinds and Christians alike and even those who have miserably apostatized from Christ or who intransigently and tenaciously deny the divinity of His person and mission.

Certainly such movements as these cannot gain the approval of Catholics. They are founded upon the false opinions of those who say that since all religions equally unfold and signify, though not in the same way, the native, inborn feeling in us all through which we are borne toward God and humbly recognize His rule, therefore, all religions are more or less good and praiseworthy.

The followers of this theory are not only deceived and mistaken but since they repudiate the true religion by attacking it in its very essence, they move step by step to naturalism and atheism. Hence it clearly follows that anyone who gives assent to such theories and undertakings utterly abandons divinely revealed religion.

When the question of promoting unity among Christians is under consideration many are easily deceived by the semblance of good. Is it not right, it is said repeatedly, indeed is it not the duty

of all who call upon Christ's name to cease mutual recriminations and join together in ties of mutual charity? For who would dare to say that he loves Christ when he will not strive to his utmost to attain that which Christ prayed for to His Father when He asked that His disciples might "be one?"¹

And did not Christ Himself wish His disciples to bear the sign and be distinguished by the characteristic that they love one another: "By this shall all men know that you are My disciples, if you have love one for another?"² Would, they add, that all Christians were one, that they might drive out the evil of irreligion which every day spreads more widely and threatens to overturn the Gospel.

These and like arguments are brought forward and amplified by those who call themselves Pan-Christians. No longer are they confined to small and scattered groups but, they grow, so to speak, by whole phalanxes and unite themselves in extensive organizations which, although the members are imbued with different faiths, non-Catholics for the most part direct.

The work itself is promoted with such zeal that it has gained a great variety of followers and has even ensnared the minds of Catholics with the entrancing hope of attaining a union that would seem to meet the will of Holy Mother Church to whom nothing is more hallowed than the recall

¹ John 17, 21.

² John 13, 35.

and the return of her wandering children to her bosom. Yet beneath the coaxing words there is concealed an error so great that it would destroy utterly the foundations of the Catholic Faith.

Moved by the consciousness of Our Apostolic office to guard the flock of the Lord from error, We invoke your zeal, Venerable Brethren, to ward off this evil. We are convinced that through your writings and your words, the principles and the reasons We shall expound will more quickly reach the people. They will then understand what to think and what to do about the effort made to coalesce in one body, through some sort of a pact, all who call themselves Christians.

We were created by God, the Maker of all things, to know Him and serve Him; our Maker has, therefore, full right that we serve Him. For the governance of mankind God could have prescribed only the one law of nature which He wrote upon the mind of man at his creation and thenceforward He could have ruled the steps of this law under His customary providence.

Instead He preferred to give us the commandments to prepare us, and in the course of the centuries from the origin of mankind to the coming and teaching of Christ Jesus He Himself taught man the duties that rational beings owe their Creator. "God, who, at sundry times and in divers manners, spoke in times past to the fathers by the prophets, last of all, in these days hath spoken to us by His Son."³

³ Hebr. 1, 1 seq.

From this it follows that the true religion cannot be other than that which is founded in the revealed word of God. This revelation, inaugurated at the beginning of time and continued in the Old Testament, Christ Jesus Himself perfected in the New. Now if God has spoken, and that He has indeed spoken is proven by history, there is no one who does not see that it is man's duty to believe God absolutely in His revelations and to obey Him without qualification in His commandments. Precisely that we might rightly fulfill both duties for the glory of God and our own salvation, the only Begotten Son of God founded His Church upon earth.

They, therefore, who profess themselves Christians cannot, We think, but believe in Christ's establishment of one Church and only one. Yet when one asks what that church ought by the will of its Founder to be, then not all agree. Indeed a great many deny, for example, that Christ's Church ought to be visible; at least in the sense that it should stand forth as one body of faithful united in one identical doctrine and under one authority and rule. On the contrary they understand by a visible Church nothing but a society formed by various Christian communities even though these adhere to different and even mutually contradictory doctrines.

Instead Christ Our Lord founded His Church a perfect society, external of its own nature and perceived by the senses, which would pursue for all future time the task of saving mankind

through the guidance of one head,⁴ through being taught by a living voice,⁵ and through the dispensation⁶ of the sacraments, as fountains of the grace of Heaven. Wherefore, He likened His Church to a kingdom,⁷ to a house,⁸ to a sheep-fold,⁹ to a flock.¹⁰

So marvelously constituted a Church could not cease altogether and be extinguished when its Founder and the Apostles who first propagated it had died, for it had been commanded to lead to eternal salvation all men without distinction of time or place: "Going therefore forth, teach all nations."¹¹ Would the Church lack power or efficacy in the perpetual fulfillment of its work when Christ Himself, as He solemnly promised, is with it forever? "Behold I am with you all days even to the consummation of the world."¹² Necessarily, therefore, the Church of Christ ought not only to exist today and always, but still more, be the same as it was in the Apostolic Ages, unless we should wish to utter the absurdity that Christ Our Lord either was not adequate to His purpose or had erred when He asserted that "the gates of hell shall not prevail against it."¹³

⁴Matth. 16, 18 seq.; Lu. 22, 32; John 21, 15-17.

⁵Mark 16, 15.

⁶John 3, 5; 6, 48-59; 20, 22, seq.; cf. Matth. 18, 18, etc.

⁷Matth. 13.

⁸Cf. Matth. 16, 18.

⁹John 10, 16.

¹⁰John 21, 15-17.

¹¹Matth. 28, 19.

¹²Matth. 28, 20.

¹³Matth. 16, 18.

And here there is presented the opportunity to set forth and remove a falsity upon which, it seems, this whole question hinges and from which is drawn the multiple effort of the non-Catholics who strive, as We have said, for the confederation of the Christian churches.

The authors of this plan are in the habit of quoting the words of Christ: "That ye all may be one. . . . There shall be one fold and one shepherd,"¹⁴ yet in the sense that these words express a desire and a prayer of Christ Jesus that has thus far lacked all effect. They contend that the unity of faith and governance which is the sign of the true and one Church of Christ, has almost never existed up to this time and does not exist today; it can be wished for and perhaps sometime it can be obtained through common submission of the will but meanwhile it must be considered a fiction.

They say, moreover, that the Church by its very nature is divided into parts, that it consists of many churches or particular communities which are separated among themselves and although they have certain points of doctrine in common differ in others; and that at most the Church was the one Church and only Church between the apostolic era and the First Ecumenical Councils.

Therefore, they say, the controversies and old differences of opinion which to this day divide the Christian name, should be completely put aside and with the remaining doctrines there should be

¹⁴John 17, 21; 10, 16.

formulated and proposed a common rule of faith in the profession of which all can know and feel themselves brothers. United by some sort of universal covenant, the multitude of churches or communities will then be in a position to oppose fruitfully and effectively the progress of unbelief. This, Venerable Brethren, is the more general opinion.

There are, however, some among them who assume and grant that Protestantism, as they call it, has rejected very inadvisedly certain articles of faith and certain rites of external worship that are fully acceptable and useful, which the Roman Church still preserves. But they add immediately that the Church has corrupted the early religion by adding to it and by proposing for belief certain doctrines that are not only foreign to but are opposed to the Gospel, among which they bring forward chiefly that of the primacy of jurisdiction assigned to Peter and his successors of the Roman See.

Among them are also a few, though a very few, who indulge the Roman pontiff with a primacy of honor or a certain jurisdiction or power which, however, they think is derived not from divine right but in a certain manner from the consent of the faithful. Others have even advanced so far as to wish the Pope, himself, to preside over their multi-colored conferences.

If, however, it is easy to find many non-Catholics preaching often of brotherly communion in Christ Jesus, you will indeed find none to whose

minds it would occur to submit themselves and obey the Vicar of Christ either as teacher or as ruler of the Church. Meanwhile they affirm that they would gladly treat with the Roman Church though upon the basis of equality of rights and as equals. If they could so treat, they do not seem to doubt but that an agreement might be entered into through which they would not be compelled to give up those opinions which are thus far the cause why they have wandered outside the one fold of Christ.

On such conditions it is clear that the Apostolic See cannot in any way participate in their reunions and that Catholics cannot in any way adhere or grant aid to such efforts. If they should do so, they would give authority to a false Christian religion completely foreign to the one Church of Christ. But could we suffer—which would be utterly iniquitous—the truth and indeed the divine revealed truth to be brought down to the level of bargains? For it is the safeguarding of revealed truth now that is at stake.

If Christ Jesus sent His apostles into the whole world to imbue all nations with the evangelical faith and that they might not err in anything desired that they be first taught all truth by the Holy Ghost,¹⁵ could the teaching of the apostles disappear or even be darkened in a Church of which God Himself is the ruler and guardian?

And if Our Redeemer plainly said that His Gospel cared not for the Apostolic Ages alone

¹⁵ John 16, 13.

but for all future generations could the content of the faith become in the passing of time so obscure and uncertain that it would today permit acceptance of contradictory opinions?

If that were true one must likewise say that the coming of the Holy Ghost upon the apostles and the endless abiding of the Holy Ghost in the Church and the preaching of Jesus Christ have for these many centuries lost all efficacy and usefulness. But to affirm that, is blasphemy.

Moreover, when the only Begotten Son of God commanded His legates to teach all nations, He then bound all men with the duty to believe what was announced to them by "witnesses preordained of God."¹⁶ He attached to His command the sanction, "He that believeth and is baptized shall be saved: but he that believeth not shall be condemned."¹⁷ Now this double commandment of Christ, which must be observed, to teach and to believe so as to attain eternal salvation, cannot even be understood if the Church does not propose the evangelical doctrine entire and clear and if in the teaching of it, it is not free from all danger of error.

How far, indeed, do they wander from the way who think that a deposit of truth exists on earth but that one must seek it with such tiring labor and lengthy studies and disputes that hardly is the life of a man long enough to find it and master it. As if the most kind God had spoken

¹⁶ Acts 10, 41.

¹⁷ Mark 16, 16.

through the prophets and His only Begotten Son that a few only, and those already bowed down in years, might learn the truth that He has revealed through them, and not to give a teaching of faith and morals through which man would be ruled throughout the whole course of his life.

It might appear that the Pan-Christians, engaged in trying to confederate the churches, are pursuing the noble idea of increasing charity among all Christians. Yet how could charity harm faith?

All remember how John, the very Apostle of Charity, who in his Gospel seems to have opened the secrets of the Most Sacred Heart of Jesus and who always inculcated in the minds of his disciples the new commandment, "Love ye one another," had wholly forbidden them to have relations with those who did not profess entire and uncorrupted the teachings of Christ. "If any man cometh to you and bring not this doctrine, receive him not into your house nor say to him, God speed you."¹⁸ Since charity is founded in whole and sincere faith, the disciples of Christ must be united by the bond of unity in faith and by it as the chief bond.

How could a Christian covenant be imagined in which they who entered it could in matters of faith each retain, although contrary to those of others, their own opinions and judgments? Through what agreement could men of opposed

¹⁸II John 10.

opinions become one and the same society of the faithful?

How, for example, they who affirm that sacred tradition is a true source of divine revelation and they who deny it?

They who hold that an ecclesiastical hierarchy formed of bishops, priests and ministers is divinely constituted and they who assert that little by little it came into being to suit the conditions of time and events?

They who adore Christ really present in the Most Holy Eucharist by that wonderful change of bread and wine called transubstantiation and they who say that the Body of Christ is present there only through faith or through the sign and the virtue of the sacrament?

They who hold that in the Eucharist there is both sacrifice and sacrament and they who say that it is only a remembrance or commemoration of the Last Supper?

They who believe it good and meritorious to pray to the saints reigning with Christ, above all to Mary, Mother of God, and to venerate their images, and they who contend that such a form of worship is wrong because it draws from the honor due Jesus Christ, "the one mediator of God and men?"¹⁹

In such great differences of opinions we do not know how a road may be paved to the unity of the Church save alone through one teaching

¹⁹ Cf. I Tim. 2, 5.

authority, one sole law of belief and one sole faith among Christians.

Moreover, we know how easy is the path from denial of this to the neglect of religion, or indifferentism, and to modernism which holds the very same error, to wit: dogmatic truth is not absolute but relative, it is proportionate to the various needs of times and places and to the various tendencies of the mind, since dogmatic truth is not contained in an unchanging revelation but is such that it accommodates itself to the life of men.

In matters of faith it is not permitted to make a distinction between fundamental and so-called non-fundamental articles of faith, as if the first ought to be held by all and the second the faithful are free to accept or not. The supernatural virtue of faith has as its formal cause the authority of God the Revealer, which suffers not such a division.

Therefore, as many as are of Christ give, for example, to the dogma of the Immaculate Conception the same faith they give to the mystery of the August Trinity and they believe in the Incarnation of the Word no differently than they believe in the infallible teaching power of the Pope, in the sense defined by the Vatican Ecumenical Council.

Not because the Church has defined and sanctioned truths by solemn decree of the Church at different times, and even in times near to us are

they therefore not equally certain and not equally to be believed. For has not God revealed them all?

The teaching authority of the Church, which by divine plan was established on earth that revealed truths might be preserved untouched forever, and quickly and safely come to the minds of men, is daily exercised by the Roman Pontiff and the bishops in communion with him.

Still it has the duty to proceed opportunely in defining points of faith with solemn rites and decrees, when there is a need to declare them to resist more effectively the errors and assaults of heretics or to impress upon the minds of the faithful clearer and more profound explanations of points of sacred doctrine.

However, in this extraordinary use of the teaching authority nothing is invented nor is anything new added to the sum of truths that are, at least implicitly, contained in the deposit of divine revelation that was entrusted by God to the Church. Instead points of faith are defined that could by chance still seem obscure to some or truths are established as matters of faith that for the first time were called into question.

Therefore, Venerable Brethren, it is clear why the Apostolic See has never permitted its children to take part in these congresses. The unity of Christians cannot be otherwise obtained than by securing the return of the separated to the one true Church of Christ from which they once unhappily withdrew. To the one true Church of Christ, We say, that stands forth before all and

that by the will of its Founder will remain forever the same as when He Himself established it for the salvation of all mankind.

The mystical Spouse of Christ has in the course of the centuries remained unspotted nor can it ever be contaminated. St. Cyprian says: "The Spouse of Christ cannot commit adultery; she is incorrupt and modest, she knows one house, she guards with chaste modesty the holiness of one room."²⁰ This same holy martyr marveled, and with reason, how anyone could think that "the unity which proceeds from the stability of God and is bound together by the sacraments of heaven could be torn asunder in the church or separated by the wills of the discordant."²¹

Since the Mystical Body of Christ, that is to say, the Church, is, like the physical body, a unity,²² a compact thing closely joined together,²³ it would be false and foolish to say that Christ's Mystical Body could be composed of separated and scattered members. Whoever therefore is not united with it is not a member of it nor does he communicate with its Head Who is Christ.²⁴

No one is found in the one Church of Christ and no one perseveres in it unless he acknowledges and accepts obediently the supreme authority of St. Peter and his legitimate successors. Did not the very ancestors of those who are entangled

²⁰ De Cath. Ecclesiae unitate, 6.

²¹ Ibidem.

²² I Cor. 12, 12.

²³ Eph. 4, 16.

²⁴ Cf. Eph. 5, 30; 1, 22.

in the errors of Photius and the Protestants obey the Roman bishop as the high shepherd of souls?

Children did, alas, abandon their father's house but the house did not therefore fall in ruins, supported as it was by the unceasing help of God. Let them return, then, to the common father of all. He has forgotten the unjust wrongs inflicted upon the Holy See and will receive them most lovingly. If, as they often say, they desire to be united with Us and with Ours, why do they not hasten to return to the Church, "the mother and mistress of all the followers of Christ?"²⁵

Let them listen to Lactantius crying: "It is only the Catholic Church that retains the true worship. It is the fountain of truth, it is the household of the faith, it is the temple of God: if anyone does not enter it or if anyone departs from it, he is a stranger to the hope of life and salvation. Let no one deceive himself by continuous wranglings. Life and salvation are in the balance, which if not looked to carefully and diligently will be lost and destroyed."²⁶

Let these separated children return to the Apostolic See established in this city which the Princes of the Apostles, Peter and Paul, consecrated with their blood, to this See, "the root and matrix of the Catholic Church,"²⁷ not indeed with the idea or hope that "the Church of the living God, the pillar and ground of truth"²⁸

²⁵ Conc. Lateran, IV, c.5.

²⁶ Divin. Instit. 4, 30, 11-12.

²⁷ S. Cypr. Ep. 48 ad Cornelium, 3.

²⁸ I Tim. 3, 15.

will abandon the integrity of the faith and bear their errors, but to subject themselves to its teaching authority and rule.

Would that what has not been granted to many of Our predecessors would be granted to Us, to embrace with the heart of a father the children over whom We mourn, separated by an evil discord from Us. May God Our Saviour "Who will have all men to be saved and to come to the knowledge of the truth"²⁹ hearken to our ardent prayer and vouchsafe to call back all wanderers to the unity of the Church!

In behalf of which lofty intention We invoke, and We ask that you invoke the intercession of the Blessed Virgin Mary, Mother of Divine Grace, conqueror of all heresies and Help of Christians, that soon may dawn that longed-for day when all will hear the voice of Her Divine Son, "keeping the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace."³⁰

You know well, Venerable Brethren, how We desire their return; and We wish all Our children to know it and not only they of the Catholic world but all who are separated from Us. If they will ask in humble prayer the grace of God, there is no doubt but that they will come to recognize the one true Church of Jesus Christ and enter it, united with Us in perfect charity.

In expectation of this and as a sign of the favor of God and a witness of Our Fatherly benevolence, to you, Venerable Brethren, and to your

²⁹ I Tim. 2, 4.

³⁰ Eph. 4, 3.

clergy and people We lovingly bestow the Apostolic Blessing.

Given at Rome at St. Peter's the sixth of January, the Feast of the Epiphany of Our Lord Jesus Christ, in the year nineteen hundred and twenty-eight, the sixth of our Pontificate.

PIUS XI.

STUDY CLUB OUTLINE



Text: ENCYCLICAL OF PIUS XI
Mortalium animos

(For additional reading matter use
any good work on Catholic Apologetics)

Subjects for Discussion

1. Origin of the desire for international brotherhood.
 2. Similar natural origin of the desire for religious unity.
 3. Chief theory of those who seek confederation of churches in the name of unity.
 4. Revelation in relation to true religious unity.
 5. Christ's establishment of one indefectible, infallible church.
 6. The Pan-Christian idea of the nature and history of the Church.
 7. Possibility that a bargain among followers of different religious opinions would attain reaching a knowledge of Christ's teachings.
 8. Exact type of conference with non-Catholic churches that is condemned.
 9. Reasons for an unfailing Church.
 10. Relation between charity and unity in faith.
 11. Variety of beliefs among Christians in relation to unity.
 12. Condition necessary for religious unity.
 13. "Fundamental" and so-called "non-fundamental" articles of faith.
 14. Manner of exercise of the teaching authority of the Church.
 15. Unity of all in the Catholic Church, as Christ's answer to the need for unity.
 16. The supreme authority of the successors of St. Peter.
 17. The Pope's desire for unity.
 18. Contrast between a confederation of churches reached through agreement upon "fundamentals," and unity in the faith as Christ revealed it.
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