

The Church we believe in is one



Julien Hammond witnessed to his experiences in ecumenism at the Oct. 21 session of Nothing More Beautiful. Ramon Gonzalez, Western Catholic Reporter

Following is the text of the witness given by Julien Hammond, the Edmonton Archdiocese's officer for evangelization and catechesis, at the Oct. 21 session of Nothing More Beautiful.

In good Catholic form, I want to begin my reflections this evening with a kind of confession: When Archbishop Smith first asked me about being a witness at NMB, I just laughed and said to him, "You're not serious, Your Grace! What could I possibly say to the people of our archdiocese that would inspire a greater faith?"

His Grace simply told me to go home and think about it, and as I did so I was reminded of St. Peter's words to his own community several centuries earlier when he said, "Always be ready to make your defence to anyone who demands from you an accounting for the hope that is in you" (1 Peter 3.15).

And so, tonight, I guess an accounting has been asked of me. And why not? For over a decade I have lived and served among you as a labourer in the vineyard (and in some regard, as one given supervision over of a certain portion of the vineyard); and people should know who their leaders are and call them to account from time to time, don't you think?

So here is my witness, my "accounting for the hope that is within me." May it serve to call us all to a greater witness than the one that I have to give.

AN ORDINARY LIFE

At the start, I want to state that my life, and especially my faith life, is by no means extraordinary. The truth is that I am very ordinary in my Catholic practice and in my Christian life in general. Ordinarily I participate in the life of my Catholic parish and community; I think about my Baptism and the implications of my faith in day-to-day living. Ordinarily I turn to the Scriptures and to the Sacred Tradition as places where I encounter Jesus.

Ordinarily I identify within myself moments or attitudes when I fail to live up to my baptismal call to holiness. And ordinarily (maybe not right away, but eventually), I come to regret my failings; I try to repent of these things and to change my ways. All of this is to me a very ordinary part of Christian living, as I'm sure that it is for most of you.

If there is any "extraordinary" dimension to any of this, it is perhaps that I am a person of my generation who still believes and engages in these spiritual exercises. And maybe because I do and believe these things, God has put it on my heart to feel deeply about certain things within the Church, and to want to work to improve those things within our Church that need improvement.

In particular, God has put it on my heart to feel deeply what the Catechism of the Catholic Church calls the "wounds to unity" within the Church. This comes as something of a surprise to me, as I hope my testimony tonight will illustrate for you.

Yet it has become the greatest blessing in my life to discover the Lord calling me to pray and work for Christian unity, to become an ecumenist, that is, one who strives after the restoration of unity in the Church. So that is where I want to begin my reflection this evening, a reflection on how I have come to perceive this specific call in my life.

DOMESTIC CHURCH

Like so many of us here tonight, I first learned about Christian unity – not only about it, but the actual practice of it – in the domestic Church of my parents' home, the first school of my faith.

On the surface of things this may not have been the most obvious place for me to learn such things. For those of you who might not know my background, I grew up in the little Prairie town of Shaunavon, Sask., the second child and first son of two French Canadian Catholic parents.



A Greek Orthodox priest prays in front of a 14th-century icon, Descent from the Cross. Julien Hammond says his years at a Ukrainian Catholic residential school gave him a greater sense of the diversity within the Catholic Church. Yiorgos Karahalios, Catholic News Service

My father had migrated from Quebec to southern Saskatchewan in the early-1960s where he met my mother in a small francophone community that was well steeped in the “perdre sa langue c’est perdre sa foi” (to lose one’s language is to lose one’s faith) school of thought. My father is the ninth child of 20 born to my now deceased Hammond grandparents, while my mother is the last of 11 born to her late parents; so clearly you can see that ours is a very large Catholic family, going back for generations.

In our house, perhaps because there are so many hotheads in our family, me included, the full spectrum of emotions was permitted to be expressed: joy, pain, sadness, anger, pride, etc. In this kind of setting, my parents, me and three siblings – all of us so very different (or diverse) and yet very strongly one (or united) – were always aware of the need to dialogue about things, to ask forgiveness from one another and to love beyond the pain of any momentary transgressions.

Above all, love was demonstrated, expected and in some instances even demanded of us because, after all, we are family. In this setting I first learned the stuff of ecumenism: patience, kindness, dialogue, forgiveness and love.

DIVERSE POPULATION

For a variety of reasons, my parents established themselves in a very Anglo-German town in Saskatchewan; a place dominated by Lutherans and United Church people, but also containing a sizeable Catholic community and the usual half dozen or so other Christian communities, much as you would find in most towns on the Prairies.

Our neighbours on every side, as I was growing up, represented the diversity of this Christian population, a matter I didn't pay all that much attention to as a kid, except that we had certain weekend and holiday rituals, while my friends and others did "different things." That's just the way it was.

I really had no idea growing up that Catholics and Lutherans had fought wars against each other several centuries earlier; or that the Hutterites that we saw in the local Co-op store had come to Saskatchewan from other parts of the globe to escape religious persecution (in part instigated by Catholics).

For that matter, I didn't know that there was very much difference between any of the various other Christians in town. To me, at that time, they were all just "Protestants," which meant people who "protest" against the way the Catholic Church does certain things. It never occurred to me, then, that these people might also be people of the Way, perhaps with a more sincere desire to know Christ and a deeper love for him than I knew in my juvenile Catholic way.

Today, of course, in my adult life, having met and talked to all manner of Christian and non-Christian people, I know that there are many Catholic and non-Catholic Christians who far exceed me in the practice of the Christian life; who are more knowledgeable than I am in the contents of the Bible or in certain aspects of the Sacred Tradition; who enjoy a more intimate relationship with Jesus or who exercise a more vibrant spiritual life than I do.

Furthermore, I have come to recognize that there are also many non-Christian people who have much to teach me about their devotion and practice, and I am genuinely interested and inspired by their faith-filled example. Simple as this may appear, this has been one of the most significant discoveries of my spiritual journey thus far.

VIBRANT PARISH

The parish I grew up in, Christ the King, was a typical small town Catholic Church. I remember the Catholic community there being very vibrant when I was a kid. My family members were all very involved in the life of the parish. My father was (and still is) a prominent member of the Knights of Columbus there. He was elected a Catholic school trustee for a time, served on the liturgy committee of our parish and continues to coordinate the Sunday Communion ministry to shut-ins in town.

My mother was (and is) a member of the Catholic Women's League, she sings in the choir, and is a lector at weekday liturgies. My sisters and brother were all, in their time, leaders of song in our parish, and we seemed to go to absolutely everything that was planned at the church.

For my part, I was immersed in parish leadership roles from early on, first as a team leader of altar servers, then as president of the Catholic Youth Organization of our parish, which got me onto the parish pastoral council, where I served as a youth rep until the age of 14 when I left my hometown for

schooling out of province.

In this little town where I grew up, anytime an event was happening in the community (like a fowl supper or when a Christian speaker came to town or when a tragedy befell some family in the community), people rallied to the cause because it was the neighbourly (that is, "Christian") thing to do.

I think this kind of ecumenism happens a lot on the Prairies, where people don't get all caught up in denominational labels; we just go about living life together without really referencing our religious differences at all. It wasn't until much later in my life, thanks to Pope John Paul II, that I was able to put words to this type of ecumenical activity. He called this engaging in a "dialogue of life" together with others (cf. *Redemptoris Missio*, 57).

I have come to see, and I am very happy to say, that I was steeped in this "dialogue of life" from my earliest days.

BOARDING SCHOOL

In order to ensure that we all received a Catholic education, and since we had no Catholic high school in my hometown, my parents made a decision (and tremendous sacrifices) to send all of their children to private Catholic residential schools in Western Canada. For my part I was sent to St. Vladimir's College, a minor seminary-high school in Roblin, Man., which was operated at the time by Redemptorist Fathers of the Ukrainian Catholic Church. What an immersion that was in the spirituality, language, culture and liturgical practice of the Christian East!

I had no idea when I first arrived at the college that there even was a Christian East or that there was so much diversity within the Catholic Church.

For that matter, I had no idea that nearly a millennium earlier the successors of the apostolic brothers – Sts. Peter and Andrew – had mutually excommunicated each other from the faith, leaving each to lay competing claims to orthodoxy and catholicity. All of this came as quite a shock to me.

Yet I was fascinated to learn about it. And the truth is that I fell in love with the Eastern Church, with the "smells, bells and yells" of their liturgical form, their rich incarnational theology, and the intense spirituality of iconography and the Jesus Prayer tradition.

I can't think of a finer formation for a Catholic teenager then to be exposed to the breadth of the Christian tradition, or again in the words of Pope John Paul II, to be taught "to breathe with both lungs of the Church," East and West.

Truly, the St. Vlad's years were some of the most precious and formative years in my life.

I want to share with you a spiritual insight that I retained from my years in Roblin which relates to the spirituality of icons. Every day we celebrated Divine Liturgy in our college chapel, and as is the case in most Eastern churches, the lay faithful stand face to face before a wall of icons (known as an iconostas) that separates the sanctuary (representing heaven) from the nave of the church (representing earth).

Every day as I gazed upon these icons, and particularly upon the so-called "oriental" face of Jesus, I perceived something of the genius of the Eastern Church; that as I was looking upon the face of Christ in these images, more importantly and more profoundly, Jesus was gazing upon me in that chapel.

And what did he see there, as he looked upon me? Friends, I am still working out the answer to this question, but suffice it to say that like the very Church itself, I was then and certainly am now a mixed bag of good and bad, of righteous and still needing to be redeemed. This was another moment of spiritual growth in my life.

MATURATION IN FAITH

After high school, I went to seminary for several years, first in London, Ont., and eventually here in Edmonton at St. Joseph Seminary and Newman Theological College. It was in these institutions that I encountered "Christ the Teacher" and where I really matured in my Catholic identity and faith. I learned there some hard lessons about living the Christian life in community.

At the same time, I received a rich formation in the Catholic tradition, and in a formal way, for the first time, I came to understand and articulate those things that I had learned growing up in a Catholic family, in Catholic parishes and in Catholic schools.

This formal immersion into the Catholic tradition led me further into an exploration of the Jewish roots of Christianity. As part of a study program through the University of St. Michael's College in Toronto, I lived and studied for a year in Jerusalem at the Ratisbonne Centre for Jewish Studies. What a rich year that was, learning Hebrew and studying Jewish interpretive sources, exploring the Jewish roots of Christianity and the thorny history of Jewish-Christian relations.

YEAR IN ISRAEL

In many ways that year in Israel was a watershed moment in my life when I had to face up to the truth of my Christian identity: that it was not all roses in our Church all of the time; that people throughout history strayed from fidelity to the Gospel or just plain made mistakes; and that I, too, carried within me the consequences of some of those sins or mistakes of history.

I began to understand, also, immersed as I was in a non-Christian environment that year, what it means to be a Christian by choice; to offer a personal

assent to the choice made by my parents to have me baptized; to make the faith my own as it were or rather to allow Christ to truly enter my life as Lord of my life.



Cardinal Walter Kasper walks with Anglican Archbishop Rowan Williams of Canterbury at the 2008 Lambeth Conference in England. Julien Hammond was moved by Kasper's challenge to make Catholic teaching on ecumenism come alive at the grassroots level. Anglican Communion News Service

In a particular way, too, I was able in that year to catch a glimpse of the Jewish face of Jesus. I love the Jewish face of Jesus and I love that the Gospels invite us to call him "Rabbouni" (loosely translated, my rabbi/teacher/master).

You know in the Jewish tradition, at least among certain branches of Judaism, the relationship between teacher and student, or master and disciple, is considered to be a sacred relationship, and the disciple is encouraged to follow the master in all things.

In my present walk with Jesus, I take this approach very much to heart. I am continually striving to observe and learn and imitate the Master through my encounters with him in the Scriptures, through the community of the Church and in my everyday life.

WHAT WE HOLD IN COMMON

But saying this and achieving it are obviously separate things; and sometimes I am more aware of the differences between the Master and me than what we have in common. Yet like my work in ecumenism, I am consoled by the fact that all is not difference, and indeed what we have in common is infinitely greater than whatever our differences may be.

And, if I may be so bold as to quote St. Paul's letter to the Romans, I suppose that "I am convinced that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor rulers, nor things present, nor things to come, nor powers, nor height, nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God

in Christ Jesus our Lord” (Romans 8.38-39). This I believe with my whole heart.

* * *

Now before I leave here tonight, I would like to share with you an episode that has animated my life and ministry in the Archdiocese for nearly a decade now.

When I first came to work as ecumenical officer of the archdiocese, Archbishop Collins sent me to Laval University in Quebec, to attend a large gathering of ecumenists there from all over the country. They were there to give a kind of reporting of their activities to Cardinal Walter Kasper, who was, until just recently, the prefect of the Pontifical Council for Promoting Christian Unity, the Vatican office that looks after ecumenical matters. This was a meeting of true ecumenical experts. I was completely out of my league, but I listened attentively.

In the course of the meetings, someone seemed to grow a bit impatient with the cardinal’s nonchalant answers to matters that were being raised, and that person said something to this effect: “Your Eminence, we are being held up from being able to accomplish real unity at the grassroots by you people at the top. If you guys would move the roadblocks, then we could get about the real business of restoring unity in the Church.” (You know in those moments, you hardly want to look up to see what the cardinal’s reaction is going to be; on the other hand, you can’t resist.)

GRASSROOTS RESPONSIBILITY

Very calmly the cardinal responded something like this: “It is true that there remain certain structural difficulties between and among the churches ‘at the top’; but if the grassroots were to carry out already not only what we have recommended but what is mandated for Christian living, the things ‘at the top’ would simply melt away, because Christian unity would already be a foregone conclusion.”

What sorts of things did the cardinal have in mind when he said this, I wondered?

1. Among other things, perhaps he had in mind the answer that Jesus gave to the lawyer who asked him, “What must I do to inherit eternal life?” You will recall that Jesus directs the lawyer to what he knows best, the law, where it is written: “You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your strength, and with all your mind; and your neighbour as yourself.” At the end Jesus says to the lawyer, “Do this and you will live” (Luke 10.25-28).

Truly, if we really loved God with all our heart, soul, mind and strength, and our neighbour as our self, then Christian unity would already be a foregone conclusion since all of our relationships would be animated by love. Simply put: the antidote to division between Christians is to increase our love for

God and for one another.

2. But love for God and neighbour doesn't just happen "out of the blue," without working at it; so I suppose the cardinal had something else in mind when he spoke his words to us.

Perhaps he had in mind that famous teaching in our Church, that ecumenism is not just the work of experts, but it "involves the whole Church, faithful and clergy alike" (see Catechism of the Catholic Church, n. 822). Families, parishes and schools each have a role to play in forming people in the ecumenical spirit. This has been my own experience and this is what I have tried to illustrate through my witness here tonight.

Since I have already said something about families and schools, I would like to focus for a moment on what our Church teaches concerning unity in parishes. Our Directory for Ecumenism says that every parish "should be, and proclaim itself to be the place of authentic ecumenical witness." This "calls for care with the content and form of preaching . . . and with catechesis." In other words, we have to be mindful about what we say and teach about our own faith and that of others.

PARISH POLEMICS

It "calls too for a pastoral program which involves someone charged with promoting and planning ecumenical activity" in the parish. "Finally," and this is my favourite part, "it demands that the parish be not torn apart by internal polemics, ideological polarization or mutual recrimination between Christians, but that everyone, according to his or her own spirit and calling, serve the truth in love" (Directory for the Application of Principles and Norms of Ecumenism, 67).

Now, I don't know how many parishes in our archdiocese or elsewhere are measuring up to this description. But I do know that when the 9 a.m. choir can't get along with the 11 a.m. choir, or when the parish finance committee is at odds with the parish pastoral council, or when there is animosity between a pastor and the members of a pastoral team, there is a unity problem that if it is not checked early on can develop into what our Catechism calls "rifts, dissensions, separations and formal divisions among the members of the one Body of Christ" (n. 817).

Clearly, we all have a role to play in preventing such things from happening.

3. But lest anyone leave here tonight with the impression that ecumenism is just a matter of "pulling ourselves up by our own bootstraps," let me say that I think Cardinal Kasper probably had still a third thing in mind when he addressed us at Laval. You know, the Second Vatican Council taught that "there can be no ecumenism worthy of the name without interior conversion" (*Unitatis Redintegratio*, 7).

SINNERS CONVERT!

The way I teach this to my own students is to say that the ecumenical movement is all about conversion. Not the conversion of all those wayward sinners "out there," but truly the conversion of this wayward sinner "in here."

We don't need to look upon those figures of history who are saddled with the consequences of their sinfulness, and say, "What they did led to divisions in the Church. They are terrible sinners. Let us turn away from them and what they stand for." At least in my own case, I only need to look at my own sins – my angers, my jealousies, my intolerances, etc. – and I can see clearly how I have caused people to stray from the Church or to turn away from the Gospel, or at least I have not drawn them into the new life in Christ.

Repentance, conversion, return, new life in Christ. This is a perpetual dynamic in the Christian life, one that, as Archbishop Smith has just taught us, requires a great deal of effort and perseverance to master. It requires the ability to learn from others, to listen to others, to realize one's own lack, and to strive for a better way, in Christ.

Above all, however, it requires prayer and the ability to submit to the Holy Spirit who is the true agent drawing all of us into the oneness of the Church, into the loving unity of the Holy Trinity.

This is why our Church places such an emphasis on spiritual ecumenism, and on public and private prayer for Christian unity. It is also why our Church holds up for us the "saintly" examples of people like Father Paul Couturier, who pioneered the Week of Prayer for Christian Unity in the last century, or Blessed Maria Gabriella of Unity, who "devoted her life to meditation and prayer centred on chapter 17 of St. John's Gospel, and offered her life for Christian unity." Again Pope John Paul II's teaching: "There are no special times, situations or places of prayer for unity. Christ's prayer to the Father is offered as a model for everyone, always and everywhere." (cf. *Ut Unum Sint*, 27).

TOGETHER IN UNITY

Sisters and brothers, in ancient times the psalmist wrote: "How very good and pleasant it is when kindred live together in unity!" (Psalm 133.1). One might be tempted to say here this evening that there is Nothing More Beautiful than sisters and brothers living together in unity.

But by the same token, there is perhaps nothing so ugly or (to steal another phrase from Vatican II) there is nothing as "foreign to the mind of Christ" as sisters and brothers living apart from one another or in total indifference towards one another.

Why is this? Because faith in Christ is not handed on in isolation, but through the living example of the whole community of disciples, the Church. And if

discipleship is to be learned, it is not taught along the superhighway of individualism or carelessness towards one's neighbour. It is taught along the much more difficult path of a life lived in communion with others.

So this is my witness: that we all need each other in the one community of faith to help us to know Jesus more fully and to learn the true meaning of the Gospel. And we are all needed in the one community of faith to show forth God's radiance more fully.

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