

Sermon for the Week of Prayer for Christian Unity preached by Canon Chris Pullin on January 22nd 2012

For more than 100 years the week leading up to the celebration of the Conversion of St Paul has been kept as a time of ecumenical prayer and engagement in the hope of Christian unity; so this Sunday falls right in the middle of the Week of Prayer for Christian Unity.



There was a time when visible, organizational unity was assumed to be the goal. The Church was seen as an institution that had broken apart and needed to be pulled back together. St Paul's image of the Church as the Body of Christ has been a dominant image, and so anything which is seen as a sign of that body being broken or divided has been felt as a wound, a failure, the ripping apart of a living organism.

Yet there are other images of the Church, and we must question why this one has been allowed to be the dominant one. There is, for instance, the vine and its independently spreading branches – perhaps that says something more helpful about unity and

diversity. So does Paul's image of the Church as the Body of Christ, with its necessary emphasis on a certain sort of physical unity, and then the inescapable visitation of guilt upon us because of our failure to maintain that physical unity – does Paul's image provide us with the *best* model for our experience today?

Is there another model that might help us interpret our experience of things as they are in a more positive and less guilt-inducing way?

I'm a pragmatic theologian, and I want to look at things as they actually are and ask where God is in it all.

So I'd like to share with you a view of the Church of God as a kind of city. Rather than working for visible, organizational, institutional unity, we might more fruitfully learn how to be inhabitants of the big, multi-cultural, diverse city which is the Church.





Let's think for a moment about cities.

There will be residential areas of every sort, a university quarter, retail parks and shopping malls, a civic area with council offices and law courts, centres of culture or of relaxation: theatres, cinemas, galleries, bowling alleys, football grounds, open spaces for recreation, a financial district, a religious enclave here and there, an industrial zone – and so on.

And of course there will be other parts of the city

we may not be so comfortable with: derelict areas, sewage works, a red light district, a travellers' encampment, perhaps even a protest camp outside the cathedral.

The one city is made up of very different kinds of areas, although, if I'm a resident, these are all part of 'my city' and in some way relate to me and even belong to me. I recognise them all, I pass through them all, at least occasionally; I might not choose to frequent some of them, but they are all part of the city I in habit, the city that I own as mine.

And there are things that bind the city together: a transport system, a local radio station, a daily paper, the postal service, the emergency services, the sound of bells, the smell of the brewery, the local accent and slang. These things relate people together from the different areas and interests of the city; they help bind the place in a kind of unity; they create shared experiences; they help articulate a common story; they provide a consistency for the life we all share.



A city isn't an institution; it isn't an organization. It's an organism of immense complexity and variety, a free association of a vast number of elements, and yet it is somehow a coherent entity. I can own it as my city. I can learn to inhabit it, to be at home in it. I know where it starts and where it finishes; I have a sense of its boundaries.

I can be proud of it.



And this is why I think the city can be a model for how we might understand the Church today, and how we might celebrate unity in diversity and learn to be happy with that and not expect that somehow it has to be forged into an institution. Boris Johnson can't turn London into an institution, and I don't suppose the pope or anyone else can turn the Churches into one either.

Cities change and develop.

The London I remember from my childhood is a different city today. Although many of its principal elements remain the same physically, the institutions they contain: parliament, or the BBC, for instance, or the Natural History Museum, have adapted to a different day and age, and have helped *create* a different day and age.



And there are whole new developments, like Docklands, or the extended transport system, or the O2 Arena, that have carried the life and feel of the city forwards. It's always developing, always changing. And the mix of inhabitants changes too. Where there once were Jews we now find West Indians, and they say they're being supplanted by new immigrants. Areas that once were run down or considered 'no go' have been reclaimed or reinvented and given a new lease of life; there's always simultaneous decline and regeneration across the whole patchwork.

I find this a fruitful model for understanding the Church today. Its unity shouldn't be sought in institutional organization. It should be owned as a diverse and ever-developing city, one which we are privileged to inhabit, which needs owning in its totality even if we choose only ever to explore and know a small part or if some areas make us uncomfortable. The whole belongs to me and I belong to the whole.



I know this isn't a way of understanding the Church that will appeal to the institutionally-minded, or to systematic theologians. It's a messy model, and imprecise, no doubt. It is simply my pragmatic reflection on the way things are -- and I'm trying to find a pattern for understanding things as they are rather than trying to make them what some neat-minded person might want them to be. If institutional ways of working towards organizational unity have run into the sand (as they have) we have to find some generous and embracing way of promoting other models of unity – and this is my offering.

Where, but in the 'Church as city', can you have cathedral liturgies and open air witnessing, Southern Baptists and the monks of Mount Athos, macabre Good Friday processions in Peru and the spare worship of the Wee Frees, the censing of the icons and a 'prayer on the streets' ministry, papal splendour and Trappist austerity, base communities and monastic communities and Bible colleges and cathedral libraries and soup kitchens and Benediction and Bible study and medical missionaries, bishops in the House of Lords and people making their communion in nursing homes, Christian Aid and church schools and Taizé – the city contains them all.



And these things, all of them, are developing and changing all the time, never to be pinned down, incapable of being forged into an institution.

Yet there *is* a profound unity in that city! We have things in common – a love of Jesus, a sense of the Triune God, and sacraments, scriptures, prayer – we have a feel for where the boundaries are, and we watch and discuss where and how people push them. The city is Christ's, all of it, this varied, vibrant, developing, growing city. We can set out to explore it because it's ours as well. I might be happy to stay where I live, and that's fine.

But I can enjoy a trip to the Greek Orthodox Quarter every now and then when I fancy something a bit more exotic, or go and study with those fine Lutheran biblical scholars. I might need some quiet and healing, and find it with the Benedictines or the Franciscans. These Christians are not separated parts of a broken body, torn asunder from me; they are neighbourhoods within a big city, and I find my way to them along the roads and rails of scripture, and shared traditions of prayer, and enterprises of service and charitable compassion – all the things that we own and use in common.



Jesus says that we should be like a city set upon a hill that cannot be hidden. And in the Epistle to the Ephesians we read these encouraging words: 'So then, you are no longer strangers and aliens, but you are citizens with the saints'. Citizens, like Paul, 'of no mean city'.



This is how I am helped to understand the Church, to leave behind the exhausting and impossible task of trying to knock it into some kind of institutional unity, and to be set free from a guilt about divisions that gets none of us anywhere.

We are 'no longer strangers and aliens, but citizens with the saints'.