

Priests encouraged to show charity to other Christians

If Catholics hope to find greater unity with Christians of other denominations, they need to embrace a sense charity and reconciliation when reaching out to other believers, according to one of the world's leading experts in ecumenism.

Father Paul McPartlan, a priest of the Archdiocese of Westminster, England, and a theology professor at The Catholic University of America in Washington, D.C., delivered a Sept. 19 address on ecumenism to 98 priests of the Archdiocese of Baltimore who gathered at the Ceresville Mansion in Frederick for the annual priests' day of enrichment.

"Nothing paves the way for ecumenical understanding better than charity," said Father McPartlan, who has served on the International Theological Commission established by Pope Paul VI.

"Pope John XXIII reminded us of the primacy of charity when he said Catholics have argued too much and loved too little," Father McPartlan said. "There can be no ecumenism without interior conversion."

Pope John Paul II provided several highly visible examples of how to show genuine charity, Father McPartlan said. One of the most memorable of those gestures was when the late pope returned a portion of the relics of St. John Chrysostom from the Vatican to the Orthodox Ecumenical Patriarchate of Constantinople in 2004.

The pope had previously visited Athens and begged forgiveness for the poor way Catholics treated the Orthodox in the past, especially for the sack of Constantinople by the crusaders in 1204, Father McPartlan said.

The speaker noted that there has been much progress in ecumenism since the Catholic church embraced the concept in the decades following the Second Vatican Council. Catholic and Orthodox leaders are meeting on a much regular basis, he said, with some seeing an agreement on Holy Communion in sight. Catholic-Anglican and Catholic-Methodist dialogues have also been fruitful, he said. There have been

numerous theological joint statements published between Catholics and other denominations, he said.

“Far too many results of dialogue are unknown to the church at large,” the priest lamented. “They simply gather dust on shelves. They need to be more widely circulated and translated.”

Father McPartlan suggested that priests could incorporate statements from official agreements in their homilies to help educate parishioners.

“It’s Jesus’ prayer that we all be one,” he said. “That should be the prayer for each and every one of our parishes. Unity is God’s gift that we must prepare our hearts to receive.”

Many of the priests who attended the day of enrichment said there is an active attempt at ecumenism at the local level. Interfaith prayer services are held on special occasions and believers often work together to help those in need, work for social justice and promote a culture of life, they said.

“To break down walls you have to spend time with each other,” said Father Andrew Aaron, pastor of St. Timothy in Walkersville. “Once you build friendship, you can build understanding.”

Parishioners of St. Timothy have several inter-denominational prayer services, including one on Thanksgiving. They also work together with other churches to support the local food pantry and the CROP walk.

“I think it’s through the primacy of charity that a great many wounds can be healed,” said Monsignor Joseph Luca, pastor of St. Louis in Clarksville, whose church is also involved in ecumenical outreach.

Some priests said it can be a challenge for Catholic clergy to make ecumenism a priority when they have numerous other responsibilities. Several priests noted that one of their best ways of reaching people of other faiths was when their parishioners prepare to marry non-Catholics.

“It’s an opportunity to reflect together on the relationship with the church,” said Monsignor Luca.

Father Donald Parson, pastor of St. Peter in Oakland, said Catholics at the local level seem open to working with other churches. His parish has several ecumenical outreach efforts and participates in the Mountaintop Ministerial Association in Western Maryland.

“It has a positive affect on the community,” he said.