

# Week of Prayer for Christian Unity 2012

**I**n Poland, where the International Committee preparing the Week of Prayer for Christian Unity put together the materials for the January 2012 celebration of the Week, there is a custom centred around what is known as the *oplatek*. Unless one is Polish, or part of a Polish family, it is unlikely to be familiar. The *oplatek* is a special wafer, not unlike the bread that is used for the Eucharist, and in people's homes and churches at Christmas each person receives one such wafer and shares it with others. It is done like this. One person breaks off a piece of another's *oplatek* and eats it; and others do the same. By doing this, people not only offer good wishes to each other; they also – through accepting a piece of the bread of another person – express deeper things such as forgiveness, love and the wish to be united. Peace, heartfelt peace, is at the heart of this gesture of unity. That is why those who prepared the next Week of Prayer for Christian Unity have included, in the proposed Order of Service, this gesture of sharing the *oplatek*.

As I write these words, it is just one day after the parable of the wedding feast (Matt 22:1-14) was proclaimed in the Sunday liturgy and I cannot forget the man in it who was not wearing a wedding garment. It seems he had responded to the invitation to the feast but that he was not clothed with the attitudes that are needed at such a gathering. He was present in a physical way, but attitudinally he remained at a distance. Most of us are familiar with this experience – and certainly we know it as Christians who believe in the one Lord but whose history is marked by disunity. For this reason, we celebrate, every year, the Week of Prayer for Christian Unity. In doing so, we attempt, really, to share the *oplatek*: to break off a piece of the bread that another Christian is offering me and to say, in so doing, that I desire that we be one, with a willingness to 'wear' the attitudes that this requires.

These attitudes align us with the desire of Jesus 'that all may be one' (John 17: 21).

Each year, the Week of Prayer for Christian Unity highlights this desire of Jesus. The theme for this year is that we will all be changed by his victory, which is not a triumph in power but a victory in love (cf. 1 Cor. 15: 51-58). This being changed is imperative, because becoming one means letting ourselves be changed. Whenever I resist change, I am haunted by the figure of my recently deceased fellow Jesuit, Father Michael Hurley, who had a conviction about the



reconciliation of Christians that even preceded the Second Vatican Council and who, because of this conviction, never gave up on the belief that we could change. In 1970 he founded the Irish School of Ecumenics, in the teeth of much resistance; and for the next forty years, he lived his ecumenical vision with a passion, openness and readiness-for-change that was truly inspiring. He died on 15 April 2011, shortly before his 88th birthday, still offering suggestions, still

writing memos, still dreaming his ecumenical dream. So ardent was he that few believe he will enjoy – or would want! – eternal rest. Michael had little taste for rest and so he will, from his place in heaven, surely guide us still.

During the 2012 Week of Prayer for Christian Unity, maybe Michael, closer now to the heart of the Lord who prayed that we may all be one, will renew in us our commitment to unity. Let the Week not slide by. The Irish School of Ecumenics will prepare again this year materials that will help us in our parishes to celebrate the Week of Prayer. In this, as in all that the School does, it continues to dream the dream of its founder, pursuing its commitment to ecumenics – now re-visioned to embrace intercultural, interreligious and public theology – through its Masters Programme in Intercultural Theology and Interreligious Studies at Trinity College, Dublin, and expressing its commitment to peace and reconciliation through its Masters Programmes in International Peace Studies and in Conflict Resolution and Reconciliation. The School's Research Degrees Programme continues to flourish also, as does its commitment to adult education, its publication of research and its sponsoring of international lectures and conferences. The latter, together with the School's Interchurch outreach work and Interchurch Fora, depend on the support of persons – long-standing and, it is hoped, new – who contribute to the School. In a world where many accuse religion of fomenting disunity, this work for unity is vital. In Ireland, where the Church needs again to be credible – a 'sign' – working together as Christians is vital. In a world where the religions are ever more present to one another, interreligious conversation is a gospel imperative. So the voice of Michael Hurley calls now from his new 'place': Keep going; this is no time for rest!

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