

Tuesday Reflection 18 January 2022

Fellow-Christians or Non-Catholics?

Reflection on the occasion of the Week of Prayer for Christian Unity

One of our characteristics is the ability to make distinctions, and in some ways this is crucial for our survival - for example, we need to be able to tell and remember the difference between what is edible and what is poisonous.

Unfortunately we have not learnt how to use this gift wisely, for we seem programmed to see everything in terms of oppositions and to prioritise difference over unity. Thus, things are either 'black' or 'white', it is either 'night' or 'day', creatures are either 'female' or 'male'. In other words, we have developed a dualistic mind; our default position is "either...or".

Important though the ability to distinguish may be in certain limited situations, it turns into a curse when we start identifying one element in a pair of supposed opposites as superior to the other, and move from there to discrimination against the other, and start developing prejudices and denying the value of the other. We develop an 'us and them' mentality, where we think that by denigrating the 'other' we can enhance our own importance and power.

One of the ways we do this is language; we can for example deny the validity of a language different from ours and thus disrespect those who speak it, as in the origin of the word 'barbarian' for those who do not speak 'properly'.

Or we can define 'the others' by a negative, which says they do not 'belong' to us - after all, what else are we doing when we talk of fellow-Christians as 'non-catholics' or other people of faith as 'non-Christians'?

In fact, we expend so much energy on creating divisions that we lose sight of the unifying principle in Our Lord's prayer "that they may be one" (John 17:21) and preached by the Apostle Paul when he wrote to the Galatians: "There is neither Jew nor Gentile, neither slave nor free, nor is there male and female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus." (Galatians 3:28).

Michael Townson