

I've been wondering whether ecumenism isn't our default position – just like prayer, and happiness and the sacred. It's not something attained by addition but attained by taking away all the hindrances – all the sin that obscures that spontaneity and kindness which is otherwise natural to us all. This is the purity of heart that met Paul and his companions when they were shipwrecked on Malta; this 'unusual kindness' which is the theme of this week's prayer for Christian Unity and which surprises us, too, so prevalent is our expectation of sin, especially from pagans.

This is the sort of purity of heart which is easily mistaken for naivety or foolishness but can move mountains. Here it is displayed by Pope John XXIII when the newly established secretariat for Christian Unity met with him to establish its role at the Second Vatican Council. Was it to be merely window-dressing or would it have an active role in preparing documents? It's a story related recently on the death of the Paulist priest, Thomas Stransky, one of the first four members of the original secretariat, the others being Mgr. Jean-Francois Arrighi, Mgr. Johannes Willebrand, and Cardinal Augustus Bea. Fr. Tom was much the most junior of all those present.

As the meeting began, Pope John was actually intrigued that Fr. Tom was from the rural outskirts of Milwaukee.

'Did you live on a farm?' The pope asked. 'Yes, replied the young priest with eyes as big as the round frames of his glasses.

'Did you have animals, like chickens?' 'Yes' he said, with further surprise.

'How did you get them to lay eggs in the winter? My brother in Bergamo is having a terrible time.'

The pope then turned to pigs, but Cardinal Bea exhibited impatience with how the young priest was dominating precious minutes with the Holy Father in a discussion of livestock. But the pope turned to the cardinal and said,

'I can't answer your questions. Seize the ground. Carve out your place. In time, I will help you'.

That is all that the resourceful Cardinal Bea needed to know, and Fr Tom got it for him.

In Memoriam by Dr John Borelli. Ecumenical Trends. Nov. 2019

The secretariat now had teeth and ecumenism was accepted, though not by all, as vital to the Church's mission and identity. If we could only let such 'unusual kindness' become our norm, too, perhaps all the rest will sort itself out .

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