



Ascending to Christian Unity

**The Sword of the Spirit
Week of Prayer for
Christian Unity**

January 18-25, 2023

Table of Contents

Introduction	1
The Ecumenical Ladder	3
Jan. 18: Striving for Unity	4
Jan. 19: Getting Beyond Hostility.....	5
Testimony: Ana María de Montero	6
Jan. 20: Crossing the Borders of Indifference	7
Testimony: Mike and Lynne Karagoulis.....	9
Jan. 21: The Joy of Acceptance	10
Prayer for the Lord's Day.....	11
Jan 22: Honoring Our Call with Mutual Respect	12
Jan. 23: Discovering the Treasure of Interdependence	13
Testimony: Cristie Bradshaw	14
Jan. 24: Showing Deference with Humility	15
Testimony: Rev. Bob Sabean	16
Jan. 25: Defending One Another	17
Testimony: Pete and Amy Coyle.....	19

Imprimatur, Archbishop Georges Bacouni,
Greek Catholic Archbishop of Beirut and Byblos.

Introduction

Dear Brothers and Sisters,

As we have done in years past, we as the Sword of the Spirit want to observe the Week of Prayer for Christian Unity as a special time to focus on praying, “that they all may be one.” In praying for all our Christian brothers and sisters and for the various ecumenical efforts going on around the world, we are also hoping to raise awareness and appreciation for our ecumenical call within the Sword of the Spirit.

The little booklet you have in hand reflects this concern. Its aim is to help individuals, families, and communities fruitfully observe this season. It contains a daily Scripture passage followed by a reflection, a short prayer, and specific intentions to pray for on that day. We also include a few testimonies from across our various communities where brothers and sisters share how they live tangibly our common ecumenical vocation.

The Sword of the Spirit Assembly has adopted the following as one of our strategic priorities for this season in our life: “to deepen, broaden and renew our ecumenical call: to raise the profile, increase our conviction, and broaden the ownership by our members.” The ecumenical life and vision we share is one of our greatest gifts. At the same time, we recognize that we fall far short in living this fully and we are convinced that the Lord has more for us. This week we want to reflect on how we can move forward personally and corporately.

The structure of this booklet is as follows: the first day will serve as a reminder of what the Lord has called us to be in terms of Christian unity. The subsequent seven days will seek to outline a journey toward greater engagement (this progression is sometimes called the “Ecumenical Ladder”). We then look at the obstacles to unity, both in ourselves and among Christians more broadly: indifference or even outright hostility. In contrast, the scriptures give us clear instructions to learn not

only to respect, but also to foster a spirit of compassion and acceptance vis-à-vis brethren from other church traditions. In fact, while we come from different traditions, we form the one body of Christ, and that has significant consequences. While we are working toward the same goal, each one of us is a different part of the body. While we may look different one from another, it is those very differences that require us to acknowledge our interdependence. We need to “count others better than ourselves” (Philippians 2:1-4) and make sure we actively fight for and protect our unity. What a beautiful reality and a beautiful call!

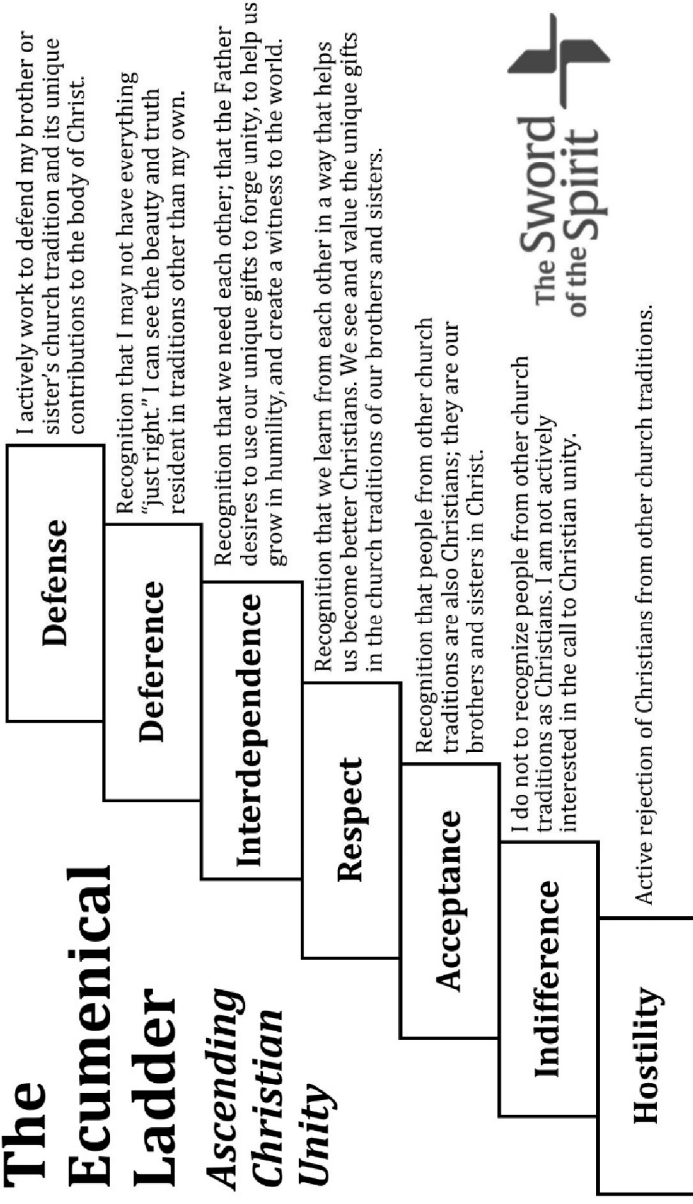
May this week be a special time when the Lord works in our hearts and speaks to us about how he wants us to contribute to this work of unity!

We are grateful to the team who assembled this booklet, for those who worked on the translations and especially to Paul Beckman for writing the thoughtful and challenging daily reflections.

Jean Barbara, president of the Sword of the Spirit

The Ecumenical Ladder

Ascending Christian Unity



Jan. 18: Striving for Unity

Ephesians 4:1-6: *As a prisoner for the Lord, then, I urge you to live a life worthy of the calling you have received. Be completely humble and gentle; be patient, bearing with one another in love. Make every effort to keep the unity of the Spirit through the bond of peace. There is one body and one Spirit, just as you were called to one hope when you were called; one Lord, one faith, one baptism; one God and Father of all, who is over all and through all and in all.*

Commentary: In these verses, the Apostle Paul makes it clear that unity is an expression of the trinitarian life revealed in us through our taking on and living out the gifts of faith, hope, and love.

First, Paul exhorts us to love. He takes two directions here. The first goes inward, toward humility, meekness, and patience—all marks of God’s transforming power. The second is outward, demonstrated through forbearance and active service (making every effort to fulfill the call to agape), worked out in and through us by the Spirit. In this way, unity is the fruit of conversion and sanctification.

Second, Paul sets unity on the theological foundation of faith that centers on the one Lord, Jesus Christ, and the only God, the sovereign Father. Our connection to that center, regardless of what tradition we represent, is baptism. By using the word baptism, Paul presents a window into the grace of God that is ours through the cross of the Lamb and through his victory over death.

Finally, unity is a sign of God’s eternal kingdom lived in the now. We are not only spurred to unity by our experience of the Spirit’s power connecting us to Jesus’ death and resurrection; we are equally pulled forward by our expectation that the Father will bring to pass his perfect purpose at the Son’s return.

So, the source of unity – and perhaps its greatest blessing – is that it resides in and originates from the Triune God himself. Unity comes to us as a gift from him; and is ours to live through the same power that brought each of us out of darkness into the kingdom of light.

Intercession: Lord, help us to change our attitudes where we do not love one another as we should. Change us so that we see you in everyone, and in that learn to have concern for each other, despite our differences. We thank you that you have put your Holy Spirit in each of us, as we have opened our lives to you. We pray that we might be able to step out in love for one another, in this bearing witness to the fact that you are living in us, and so that all may know that you are our Lord. Amen.

Jan. 19: Getting Beyond Hostility

Hebrews 12:15: *See to it that no one falls short of the grace of God and that no bitter root grows up to cause trouble and defile many.*

Galatians 5:15: *If you bite and devour each other, watch out or you will be destroyed by each other.*

Leviticus 19:17-18: *You shall not hate your brother in your heart ... You shall not take revenge or bear any grudge against the sons of your people, but you shall love your neighbor as yourself. I am the Lord.*

Commentary: The history of God's people is littered with the scandalous events of religious wars, mutual excommunications, and other acts of hatred that severely compromise the witness of Christianity and of the gospel of Jesus Christ. The fruit of such adversarial behavior is exactly what Scripture warns us would come about: defilement, disorder, destruction.

As always, however, what the world sees from the outside is simply the overflow of what resides in our hearts. The challenge

to take on the Lord's character is a steep one. After all, many of us are heirs to attitudes and perspectives that are inimical to love and unity. We might not publicly fulminate against our brothers and sisters, but our thoughts can sometimes betray a contempt toward them that – while it remains hidden from view – diminishes our ability to express the kindness, mercy, grace, and peace that the Father desires to see among his people.

As we noted in our opening thoughts, we find ourselves in need of conversion. The Holy Spirit is keen to sow seeds of humility and to open our eyes to God's perspective on our fellow believers, cleansing the inside of the cup as well as the outside, revealing a pure heart AND clean hands to the glory of his name.

Intercession: Lord, first and foremost, we pray that we might always choose to see the good in our brothers and sisters. When we see differences in worship or ways of thinking, enable us to understand and to see our differences as opportunities for learning. Help us Lord to be peacemakers, and to do whatever we can to bring your people together. Amen.

Testimony: Ana María de Montero



My name is Ana María de Montero. I am a married woman with children and granddaughters. I have been a publicly committed member of the *Árbol de Vida* community in Costa Rica for 27 years. I met the Lord in the university outreach when I was 20.

I come from a traditional Catholic family, the kind that goes to Mass on Sundays and holy days but nothing more than that.

When I made my commitment to the community, one of the

promises I made was to faithfully participate in my church. This encouraged me to know, to study, to learn every day a little more about my own Catholic Faith. Thus, I have learned to love my church and to find its support, knowledge, and comfort.

When it was explained to me that Arbol de Vida and the Sword of the Spirit were ecumenical communities, I had to start by asking: What does ecumenism mean? And that is when I began to discover other blessings in my Christian life in an ecumenical community as I began to meet evangelical brothers and sisters. With them, I have learned to imitate their love for the Word of God, how they study it, memorize it, and make it alive in each of their days. For several years I was in charge of the Children's Ministry and my evangelical brothers and sisters instructed me. It is admirable the zeal with which they evangelize the children and all the wonderful resources they develop for this purpose. The camps that we organize together, where we provide an environment of healthy fun, friendship, fellowship, and evangelization, have created fertile ground for the conversion of many young people.

Now I can answer the question: What is ecumenism? It is responding to the call of Jesus to be one. It is part of that current of grace of the Holy Spirit that unites us in so many things we have in common and allows us to respect our differences, so that they do not set us apart in our efforts to extend the Kingdom.

Jan. 20: Crossing the Borders of Indifference

Luke 10-30-33: *In reply Jesus said: "A man was going down from Jerusalem to Jericho, when he was attacked by robbers. They stripped him of his clothes, beat him and went away, leaving him half dead. A priest happened to be going down the same road, and when he saw the man, he passed by on the other side. So too, a Levite, when he came to the place and saw him, passed by on the*

other side. But a Samaritan, as he traveled, came where the man was; and when he saw him, he took pity on him.

Matthew 24:12-13: *Because of the increase of wickedness, the love of most will grow cold, but the one who stands firm to the end will be saved.*

Commentary: We are often outraged by stories of people who pass by someone who has been the victim of a crime, or who is homeless, or who is suffering from hunger or sickness. And yet, it is remarkably common for us to take the same path of avoidance when it comes to relating with brothers and sisters from other Christian traditions. We do not “hold anything against” our fellow-believers and would not speak against them outside our small circle of friends. But we are equally disinclined to actively pursue unity, whether that means gaining greater knowledge of different churches, or serving together to advance the kingdom.

The movement beyond indifference requires a change in understanding of God’s purposes. We need to see that unity is not optional; that it is among the Lord’s highest priorities; and that we cannot fully experience the fruitfulness of mission if we disregard Christians outside our affinity groups. In the end, it may seem that indifference is an improvement over hostility, but it may actually be more dangerous and even inimical to our fulfilling the call to bring the world to Jesus and his gospel.

Intercession: Dear Lord, give us the grace to see you in one another and that we may accept as our sister and brother all who bear the name of Christ. We thank you for making us one in the Body of your Son. Bless us with the desire and the will to live in peace and unity in this Christian family to which we have been called. Amen.

Testimony: Mike and Lynne Karagoulis

My name is Michael Karagoulis. My wife Lynne and I are Eastern Orthodox Christians and proud members of an ecumenical charismatic Christian community since the 1970's. We find synergy between the ancient, sturdy message and traditions of our church, and the deep personal relationships and daily practical support for Christian life in our ecumenical community. We love that we have two main avenues (two bites of the apple?) to channel our zeal for the Lord, and to try to repay the Lord for what He has done for us (Psalm 116:12-14).



Growing up with an Orthodox immigrant father and a Catholic mother, I felt some confusion, depending on which relatives took me to which church service. However, I would say the greater confusion was my inability to deeply comprehend the Gospel message in either church setting. Until I experienced a deeper indwelling of the Holy Spirit, I found both East and West liturgies perfunctory and not very life changing. For the life changing

part, I had to wait for college, where I experienced a greater release of the Holy Spirit via ecumenical charismatic Christian community. I began to understand who Jesus is, who I am, and what I am called to do. Although I was the only Orthodox Christian in my community, I discovered Orthodox members in another ecumenical community nearby. So, when I finished college, I picked up and relocated to The Work of Christ. Having fellowship with other Orthodox Christians who are also community members is extremely supportive, especially around the Pascha (Easter) holiday, since our tradition robustly observes this great feast day.

John Chrysostom (a 4th century saint) said this about celebrating the resurrection: “The Table is richly laden. All of you fare sumptuously on it. The calf is a fatted one; let no one go away hungry. All of you enjoy the banquet of faith.” This is a nice description of our rich life in ecumenical charismatic Christian community, where our practical unity across a mosaic of historical creeds educates and elevates us all to a higher level of faith and joy under the banner of the risen Christ.

Hi...I’m Lynne. Unlike my husband, my mother was Protestant and my father was Jewish. When I was 24, I was introduced to the Orthodox Church and knew I was home. I was a member of the Work of Christ, but I also desired to belong to a church, so I was Chrismated (confirmed) in 1978. It was more important for me to be Orthodox than to be married (given that the community had few Orthodox single men). However, in 1982 I met my husband Mike and 40 years and 4 kids later we are still serving the Lord together in church and the Work of Christ.

As much as I love my church, I also love the diversity within the Sword of the Spirit. It is so easy to build relationships wherever we go because we all love Jesus and desire to build His kingdom. We are a mosaic. Together we are stronger and as times get darker, we need to band together in strength and unity.

Jan. 21: The Joy of Acceptance

1 Peter 3:8: *Finally, all of you, be like-minded, be sympathetic, love one another, be compassionate and humble.*

Romans 15:5-7: *Now may the God of patience and comfort grant you to be like-minded toward one another, according to Christ Jesus, that you may with one mind and one mouth glorify the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ. Therefore receive one another, just as Christ also received us, to the glory of God.*

Commentary: As in yesterday's passage from Luke, the indifferent walk by those who are not like them. Perhaps the indifference arises from simple tribalism, or from upbringing, history, or similar soil. In order to pass to acceptance – which is a small, but necessary step toward unity – we need to move beyond the comfort of always seeing the “other.” Acceptance means that we begin to recognize ourselves in those to whom we once gave little regard. We see commonalities and shared beliefs. We perceive common struggles, joys, experiences of God. Above all, we see the Spirit's work in their lives and in their traditions.

Acceptance is yet one more step that ascends on the power of humility. It says that I and we are not the only, not the best, not the uniquely favored servants or children of the God who has sheep from many folds (John 10:16). It is a divinely inspired embrace of other believers as adopted sons and daughters of the eternal Father. Acceptance welcomes someone who is dissimilar from us because we see that we belong to the same family. Acceptance is that first declaration that what unites is greater than what separates.

Intercession: Heavenly Father, you have made us brothers and sisters in your son Jesus Christ. We pray that through our mutual sharing of the goods of our traditions, we may grow in respect for one another and so grow together to be true disciples of your son our Lord Jesus Christ. Amen.

Prayer for the Lord's Day

This prayer may be used after the Blessing of the Wine, similar to the seasonal variations in the Lord's Day Opening Ceremony.

Leader: Let us thank Him this day especially for the unity we enjoy in the Body of Christ and for our call to ecumenical life in the Sword of the Spirit. May we all become perfectly one, so that the world may know and believe. Lord our God, You are

bringing us into the fullness of unity through the work of Your Son, our Lord, Jesus Christ.

Group: Now we live with Him through the Holy Spirit, and we look for the day when we will dwell with Him in Your everlasting kingdom.

Jan 22: Honoring Our Call with Mutual Respect

Romans 12:10: *Love one another with brotherly affection. Outdo one another in showing honor.*

Proverbs 9:9: *Instruct the wise and they will be wiser still; teach the righteous and they will add to their learning.*

Commentary: To accept and to welcome each other as family members opens doors to see a new landscape. Once we have drawn near to each other, we gain a closer vision of what our brothers and sisters are really like, what their traditions offer, where we can learn and have learned from them. It can be surprising to find out how much influence each of us has on the other. Music, writings, ideas for mission, stories of heroic faith – all manner of treasure that has been passed from tradition to tradition in every generation.

Wise disciples, like the scribe of Matthew 13:52 (who brings out of his treasure old and new), find these treasures and rejoice that they are theirs as free gifts of the kingdom.

Intercession: Lord, God of eternal glory, give us opportunities to grow closer as brothers and sisters in Christ. Open our eyes so that we can discover the treasures we have to share with each other and thus, strengthened in love and mutual respect, we continue to extend your kingdom to the honor and glory of your holy name. Amen.

Jan. 23: Discovering the Treasure of Interdependence

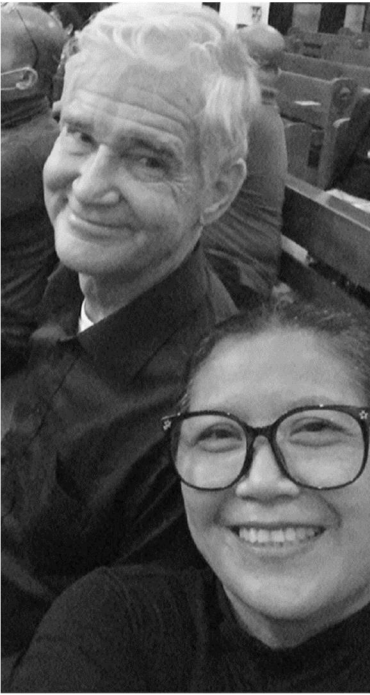
1 Corinthians 12:12-14: *For as the body is one and has many members, but all the members of that one body, being many, are one body, so also is Christ. For by one Spirit we were all baptized into one body—whether Jews or Greeks, whether slaves or free—and have all been made to drink of one Spirit. For in fact the body is not one member but many.*

Commentary: It is a profound blessing to recognize and honor the contribution of other Christians and to glimpse the measure of how our brothers and sisters have enriched us. But if we take a step back to view the portrait of Christianity in its entirety, it becomes clear that we are seeing something more like a tapestry. Times and seasons; movements and ministries; men, women and children from every age and compass point blend varying hues and textures into a God-graced foreshadowing of the glory that is to come.

The recognition of mutual blessings leads us to confessing mutual need. We Christians surely have broken Christ's body; Jesus takes the brokenness under his care and works an intimate necessity into each of our relationships. We cannot bristle at our weakness and dependence. God will not have it any other way. As this age moves toward its closing, he will see to it that we are pressed together in the furnace. But we will know, together, that there is one more in the fire.

Intercession: Heavenly Father, you who have planted in your church treasures of incalculable value, give us the grace to recognize how much we need each other to extend together your kingdom on earth. Allow, Lord, that by loving and respecting our differences we can serve you with greater joy and courage. In Jesus Christ, Your holy Son, Amen.

Testimony: Cristie Bradshaw



33 years ago, when I agreed to marry Todd, a Protestant, my father refused to walk me down the aisle. But Todd and I were fortunate to have the support of our community, Ligaya ng Panginoon (Joy of the Lord). Entering into an ecumenical marriage deepened my understanding of Christian unity. I had first-hand experience of how ecumenical love and acceptance could transform our lives. I especially treasure my in-laws, Mac and Rhoda Bradshaw, who accepted and embraced me as their Catholic daughter-in-law, respected my beliefs, and encouraged me to be a better

Catholic. They were the coolest Protestants that I have ever met!

Mac and Rhoda had served as a missionary couple in Thailand for 25 years. They then went back to Philadelphia and bought their dream house. One morning, my mom-in-law was in the kitchen, and she heard the Lord say to her very clearly: Go to Manila. She rushed to the bedroom where my father-in-law was praying and found him dumbstruck on the side of the bed. She asked if the Lord had spoken to him. He said, "Well, yes. He said, Go to Manila." They could not see how that might be, but in obedience they began to pray, and within the year God made it happen. They moved to Manila, rented a large house which happened to be in the same compound where the fledgling Ligaya community had a small office. There they met Fr. Herb Schneider, SJ, who invited them to a prayer gathering that

Sunday. It was Ligaya's first community anniversary (1976), and my parents-in-law realized that, with the international time difference, the Lord had summoned them to Manila at the same moment that, half a world away, He had said to the first members of Ligaya: "You are my joy." The Bradshaws became the first Protestant family to join Ligaya; a few others from their home church of Union Church of Manila soon joined as well. As for me, the die was cast for my future as part of a wider ecumenical family.

Jan. 24: Showing Deference with Humility

Philippians 2:1-4: *Count others better than yourself.*

Commentary: Jesus' prayer in John 17 that we be one, leaves no doubt that God's desire for his church is a unity that mirrors that of the Trinity itself. If this is the Father's plan and purpose, then we can believe that he will bring it about through his own power and grace. But here we find our limitations, since with all things ordained by God, we cannot see the fullness of how he will accomplish his work. Because of our finitude and frailty, we can only ascend each step of unity through humility and trust.

To be humble is to receive Messiah's gift of his own lowliness. It means to submit ourselves to the Father's will even where we experience the pain and offense of disunity. Humility is the expression of a heart that knows that our brokenness – the brokenness of pride, rebellion, bitterness, suspicion, and anger – is what keeps us from love and unity. We – Catholics, Protestants, Orthodox – have held on to the belief that our traditions are sufficient expressions of the kingdom of God. We have fallen prey to triumphalism, judgmentalism, and separation based on a scandalous history of division.

But the good grace of the One God is bringing us to the higher vision of laying down our lives for our friends who have been divided from us over centuries of strife. This radical call moves

us from the acknowledgment that we need each other to the confession that our brothers and sisters have what we need to live the fullness of discipleship. Only in this way, the way of the cross, will we again hear the world exclaim, “See how they love each other.” The nations are hungry to see that love and we are the highly favored ones blessed to display it.

Intercession: Dear God, grant us that we may be transformed in the image of your son Jesus Christ. That by your grace we can grow in His humility and spirit of servanthood. Help us seek our brothers and sisters of different traditions with determination, renewed hearts, and open arms, ready to acknowledge their virtues and honor and serve them always. With our respect and appreciation for them, may we advance together on the path of unity. Amen.

Testimony: Rev. Bob Sabean



It was December 1961. I was sitting in the Seminary library when God called me to life in covenant community. Before that, when I was 12 years old, he had called me to missionary service. That decision was at a summer camp sponsored by a multid denominational evangelical fellowship. Since that moment, my goal was the mission field, so I was constantly curious about the latest ideas and strategies about mission.

The previous decade was full of statistics about the future growth of cities and urbanization. The new missionary would live in a mega city. An article in the Occasional Bulletin, “Some Old Patterns for New in Missions,” by Herbert Jackson (Dec 1961), made an impression that would impact my life for the next 60 years. He called one new pattern, “Monastery approach to Mission.” It highlighted the story of Columba (circa 521-597),

the Irish missionary, and the Iona missionary community. It was a call to “intentional community.” It was my call.

I grew up in a diverse neighborhood in the outskirts of Boston, so for my theology course papers I intentionally chose investigations into Catholic and Evangelical approaches to issues, for greater clarity. Those were the years of Vatican II, and ecumenism was very much a part of the conversation.

I arrived with my family in Costa Rica in 1965 and was introduced to the charismatic movement in March 1966, a momentous occasion for my wife and me. Our evangelical ministry team worked with adolescents and university students, and I specialized in organizing vacation camps. Our goal was proclaiming a Christ-centered Gospel, with less concern for church affiliation. In the 70’s, on two subsequent occasions, I invited two charismatic Roman Catholic priests to share their testimonies in evangelistic camps for students. Their participation and powerful charismatic gifts were used by the Lord to start a renewal in the Holy Spirit for everyone present. We programmed well, but it was the Lord who ignited the fire of his Spirit in those camps. This resulted in an ecumenical evangelistic expression to the university world which started organizing the next several university camps.

From those initiatives of the Spirit emerged, on March 19, 1977, what is today our ecumenical community, *Árbol de Vida*, of which I am a fully committed member.

Jan. 25: Defending One Another

John 15:13: *No one has greater love than that they lay down their lives for their friends.*

Commentary: The final two steps in our ladder go well beyond the simple attitudes of acceptance and respect, however important those aspects of love might be. Deference itself is a

powerful weapon and antidote to the divisive tendencies of haughty tribalism. The next rung – that of defense – calls us to an even more profound offering of our identities to the grace of unity. To defend my brothers and sisters means not only a Samaritan-like concern for their welfare, but a willingness to speak on their behalf, to identify with them as beloved companions, and to justify their place in the Kingdom of God.

It is often the case that when Christians are truly looking to defend their fellow-believers there will be opposition, slander, calumny. To rise to their defense when we see our friends subject to such enmity can be truly costly. However, in this age, where the world increasingly denigrates the gospel, standing together is more crucial and valuable than ever. And yet, hatred of God and of the people of God will forge even greater unity among his children. The more we are one, the greater will be our joy, our hope, our praise, and our thanksgiving. As much as we fail and fall, as little as we know and understand, still we are confident that the Lord himself will complete the good work that he has begun.

Intercession: Lord, just as your son Jesus Christ was ready to defend his disciples despite his own safety, give us the courage to step in whenever we see our brothers and sisters under duress because of unfair criticism, slander, or persecution. Help us to identify with them and do whatever we can to defend them and protect their good name. Amen.

Testimony: Pete and Amy Coyle

We are Pete and Amy Coyle, part of the Antioch Community in London. Our marriage is an ecumenical one, with Pete being a



Catholic and Amy from a non-denominational church background.

Ecumenism deepens our faith as we see the differences in how we both live our Christian lives. I (Amy) have learned a lot about reverence in worship and I value the stillness and reflection at Mass. I've also really enjoyed embracing liturgy as a way to connect with God, which is something really new to me. I (Pete) am always encouraged by

the call to discipleship in the sermons at Amy's church and I am inspired by the works of service that they do around the local community.

There are also some challenges that come with an ecumenical marriage. Practically, trying to attend two church services plus a community meeting on Sundays can be tiring! Sometimes it is difficult that we are unable to fully enter into each other's church services, particularly around the area of communion. But all marriages involve having to make sacrifices and this is one way we lay down our lives for each other.

We think ecumenism is a great witness to our faith. Sharing our lives in Christian community with brothers and sisters from different traditions is a powerful demonstration of how Christians can be united and a real force for good in society.

Living in an ecumenical community provides us with support and encouragement for our own ecumenical family. We can

worship together freely, receive teaching and share our life together without some of the complications that can sometimes come with church services. We are also able to share our lives with other ecumenical couples and receive the blessing and wisdom that they can share with us, and hopefully share and encourage them in turn. Ecumenical community provides us with the support and strength that we would struggle to find elsewhere.

The Sword
of the Spirit



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