

# Unity in the Church

Jesuit Tom Layden is engaged in ecumenical work in Northern Ireland.

It is that time of the year again. After Christmas and before Lent, in the week of 18–25 January, we join together to pray for unity among the followers of Jesus, aware of the divisions among us.

The materials for this year's special services for Christian unity have been prepared by a group of Christians in Burkina Faso in Africa. The theme is 'You shall love the Lord your God and your neighbour as yourself' (Lk 10:27).

The call to love with one's whole self (heart, soul, strength and mind) and the neighbour as oneself is addressed to every Christian community and each individual Christian. We may express our faith and celebrate our worship in different ways, but we are all invited to love God with our whole being and our neighbour as ourselves. It is our common calling no matter what our Church, and it is our response to the God whose mercy

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knows no bounds.

These words of Jesus are followed by the story of the Good Samaritan, who showed mercy to a wounded neighbour even though there was enmity between the communities from which each came. Earlier in the story, the priest and the Levite saw the man who had been attacked on the road but chose to pass by on the other side.

The ones who might have been expected to know what God would want in such a setting decided not to become involved. They wanted to keep this messy situation at a distance. They didn't want it to impinge upon them.

We hear how the Samaritan chooses to engage with the injured party, to bind up his wounds, to bring him to the inn and to cover his expenses. His focus is on the need of his hurt neighbour rather than on his own comfort.

As followers of Our Lord, we are invited to have the attitude of heart we see in the Samaritan. To see in a person in difficulty a sister or brother needing compassion and to do unto them what we would want others to do unto us.

This is a challenging call. We know it is not easy and that it does not always come naturally. We need the power of the Holy Spirit to liberate us from self-preoccupation and to enable us to attend to the needs of others.



**Burkina Faso, Ouagadougou which will host this year's special services for Christian Unity**

This year when we gather in churches and cathedrals, schools and colleges, hospitals and prisons, community centres and other places to pray for unity among Christians, we are asking that the Holy Spirit enables us to show welcome, empathy and respect to every needy stranger. In this way, we bear witness to Christ's presence and action in our world.

A feature of the times in which we live is that many people have to leave their homeland and seek a new life in another country. They come to our country, and they need us to welcome them. All the Christian Churches have been clear and united in their call to all of us to welcome the refugee and the asylum seeker. To do unto them what we would want them to do for us if the roles were reversed. To see

their arrival in our midst as a gift to us. A gift to be welcomed. A gift from God.

The command to love God and neighbour are two sides of the same coin. As we show hospitality to the newcomers and help them settle in and feel at home among us, we are showing our desire to love the God of Mercy and Welcome with all we have to give. We recall how the disciples on the road to Emmaus met the Lord in the one they first thought was a stranger before they recognised him in the breaking of bread. The Samaritan found joy in tending to the stranger he encountered along the way. For all of us, God often comes to us in the guise of a stranger. In being neighbourly to the newly arrived, we encounter the divine.