**WEEK OF PRAYER FOR CHRISTIAN UNITY 2022**

**THE EIGHT DAYS OF PRAYER**

**DAY 1: “We observed his star in the East” (Mt 2:2).**

***Readings****:* Zech 4:1-; Ps 139:1-10; 2 Tim 1:7-1; Jn 16:7-14

***Reflection:*** In this fragile and uncertain world, we look for a light, a ray of hope from afar. In the midst of evil, we long for goodness. We look for the good within ourselves, but so often we are overwhelmed by our weakness that hope fails us. God, in his wisdom, enabled us to hope for divine intervention; but we had not anticipated that God’s intervention would be a person, and that the Lord himself would be the light in our midst. God’s gift to us is a ‘spirit of power, and love’. Not by relying on our own strength and ability are we drawn forward on the way to this perfect light, but rather by God’s Holy Spirit.

In the star from the East we see a light that penetrates the darkness that separates us from one another. The star’s light was not only an illumination at a particular historical moment but continues to shine and change the face of history. Ever since the star first appeared, the world has come to know through the lives of Christ’s followers the hope that is inspired by the Holy Spirit. Despite the vicissitudes of history and the changing of circumstances, the Risen One continues to shine, overcoming the darkness which separates us from one another. The desire to overcome this darkness that separates us compels us to pray and work for Christian unity.

***Prayer:*** Lord God, illumine our path by the light of Christ who moves before us and leads us. Enlighten us and dwell within us. Guide us to discover a small manger in our hearts where a great light still sleeps. Creator of light, we thank you for the gift of that unfading Star, Jesus Christ, our Lord and Saviour. May he be a beacon for our pilgrimage. Heal our divisions and draw us closer to the Light that we may find our unity in him. Amen.

**DAY 2: “Where is the child who has been born king of the Jews?” (Mt 2:2).**

***Readings:*** Jer 23:1-6; Ps 46; Phil 2:5-11; Mt 20:20-28

***Reflection:*** Jeremiah denounces the bad leadership of the kings of Israel who divided and scattered the people. Theirs was a leadership that destroyed nations and drove their citizens into exile. In contrast, the Lord promises a shepherd-king who will ‘execute justice and righteousness in the land’ and gather together the members of his flock.

Our world craves good leadership and is constantly seeking someone who will fulfil this desire. Where can one find such a leader? Only in Christ have we seen the example of a king or leader after God’s heart. In Christ we encounter one who does not tear down and divide but builds up and makes whole for the glory of God’s name. His rule is not self-serving and he does not use force. In Him we encounter a loving, humble servant who does not regard equality with God as something to be exploited. He is one who comes to serve, rather than be served, and his followers are called to do the same.

Leaders, both in the world and in the Church, have responsibility to bring together rather than to scatter or divide the people of God. So much division in the world and in the Church is caused by the desire for position, power and self-advantage. The more faithfully Christians emulate the servant leadership of Christ the more division in both the world and the Church will be overcome. As we work for righteousness, justice and peace for the wellbeing of all, we witness humbly to the shepherd-king, and draw others into His presence.

***Prayer:*** God, our only refuge and strength, we glorify you for you are a just and righteous God. We confess before you that we often covet worldly models of leadership. Help us to seek our Lord Jesus Christ not in the palaces of the powerful but in the humble manger and to emulate him in his meekness. Encourage us to empty ourselves as we serve each other in obedience to you.

We pray in the name of Christ who with you and with the Holy Spirit reigns forever in glory. Amen.

**DAY 3: “When king Herod heard this he was disturbed, and all Jerusalem with him” (Mt 2:3)**

***Readings:*** Neh 4:18-21; Ps 2:1-10; 2 Thess 2:13-3; 5; Mt 2:1-5

***Reflection:*** The Lord has come amongst us. Christ’s coming disturbs the ways of the world. In contrast to so many national leaders, the Lord comes in humility denouncing the injustice and oppression that accompanies the ambition for power and status. Jesus’ presence creates disturbance precisely because He rocks the boat of the powerful who work only for their own interests and neglect the common good. But, for those who work for peace and unity, Christ’s coming brings the light of hope.

We are invited to commit ourselves to the constructive action of making justice a reality in our world. When Christians work together for justice and peace our efforts are more powerful. And when Christians work together in this way, the answer to our prayer for Christian unity is made visible such that others recognise in us Christ’s presence in the world today. Through our words and actions, we can bring the light of hope to so many who are still living in the darkness of political unrest, social poverty, and structural discrimination.

***Prayer:*** O Lord, you have guided us out of darkness to Jesus. You have illumined the star of hope in our lives. Help us to be united in our commitment to bring about your Reign of love, justice and peace and so to be the light of hope to all those living in the darkness of despair and disillusionment. Take our hand, Lord, so we can see you in our daily lives. As we follow you, remove our fear and anxiety. Shine your light upon us and set our hearts on fire so that your love surrounds us with warmth. Lift us up to you, you who have emptied yourself for our sake, so that our lives may glorify you, Father, Son and Holy Spirit. Amen.

**DAY 4: “And you, Bethlehem… are by no means least” (Mt 2:6).**

***Readings****:* Mic 5:2-5a, 7-8; Ps 23; 1 Pet 2: 21-25; Lk 12:32-40

***Reflection:*** From the small and lowly city of Bethlehem, the Lord, the Son of God, made his entrance into the world. From the womb of a humble village girl, he took human flesh, and chose to live his humanity in obscurity and simplicity. Out of the obscurity of Ephrata has come a ruler, the shepherd and guardian of our souls. And though he is our shepherd, he became the Lamb who carried the sins of the world that we might be healed. Though of little significance among the great clans of Judah, Bethlehem was made great because of the birth of the Shepherd of all shepherds, the King of all kings. Bethlehem, a name that means the “house of bread”, can be a metaphor for the Church that brings to the world the bread of life. The Church, the Bethlehem of today, continues to be the place where the weak, the powerless and the small are welcome because in her each has a place.

In the midst of political turmoil, a growing culture of greed, and the abuse of power in this world, Christians in many parts of the world suffer persecution and marginalisation, living in fear of violence and injustice. Yet, they are not afraid because the Shepherd walks with them, gathering them into one fold and making them a sign of his loving presence. United, they are the yeast that leavens the batch. In their suffering they follow in the steps of the Lamb who suffered for the world’s salvation.

***Prayer:*** Good Shepherd, the fragmentation of the flock grieves your Holy Spirit. Forgive our weak efforts and slowness in the pursuit of your will. Give us wise shepherds after your own heart who recognise the sin of division, and who will lead the churches with righteousness and holiness, to unity in you. We ask you, Lord, to hear our prayer. Amen.

**DAY 5: “Ahead of them, went the star that they had seen at its rising” (Mt 2:9)**

***Readings***: Ex 13:17-14:4; Ps 121; Rev 22:5-9; Mt 2:7-10

***Reflection:*** Again and again the scriptures tell us how the Lord God walks with his people, protects them, and watches over them day and night. The path may not always be straight: sometimes we are led to retrace our steps, and at other times to return by a different route. But in all our journeying through life, we can be confident that God, who neither “sleeps nor slumbers”, protects us lest our feet slip and we fall. Even in the greatest darkness, God’s light is with us. In the fullness of time, God sent His only begotten Son, Jesus Christ. He is the guiding light for all nations, the glory of God in the world, the source of divine life, sealing a new covenant in his blood. The way ahead into unity with one another, and so into closer union with Christ, is not always clear. In our earnest attempts to build unity ourselves it is all too easy to lose sight of this fundamental message of the scriptures: that God does not abandon his people even in their failures and divisiveness. As the story of the Magi reminds us, God guides people of all kinds, with the light of the star, to where Christ, the light of the world, is to be found.

***Prayer:*** O Lord God our Father, you sent the star to lead the Magi to your only begotten Son. Increase our hope in you and let us know at all times that you are walking with us, watching over your people. Teach us to follow the guidance of your Holy Spirit, however strange the path may seem, so that we may be led to our unity in Jesus Christ, the light of the world. Open our eyes to your Spirit, and encourage us in our faith, so that we may confess that Jesus is Lord, and worship and rejoice in him as the Magi did in Bethlehem. We ask you these blessings in the name of Jesus Christ. Amen.

**DAY 6: “They saw the child with Mary his mother, and they knelt down and paid him homage” (Mt 2:11)**

***Readings:*** Ex 3:1-6; Ps 84; Rev 4:8-11; Mt 28:16-20

***Reflection:*** When the Magi from their far-away countries arrived at Bethlehem and saw the child with his mother, they worshipped him. In the presence of this revelation of God among us, eyes are cast down and knees are bent. Similarly at the sight of the burning bush, Moses hid his face, afraid to look at God. When the disciples saw the risen Christ on the mountain in Galilee, they were amazed and troubled. Yet they worshipped him. In the heavenly liturgy, the twenty-four elders fall before Him who sits on the throne. Encountering God’s presence, we respond thus: gazing, followed by amazement, leading to worship. Do we see? Are we amazed? Are we truly worshipping? How many times do we see without perceiving, our eyes remaining blind to God’s presence? How can we worship in truth if we do not see first? In our narrow vision, too often we see only our tangled disagreements, forgetting that the one Lord has given his saving grace to us all, and that we share in the one Spirit who draws us into unity. As communities enlivened by the Holy Spirit, our churches call us to walk together towards the Christ-Child to offer him homage as one people. The Spirit guides us to one another, and together guides us all to our one Lord. Our future in God is a future of unity and love; our way to this destination must reflect that same truth of one-ness in Christ.

***Prayer:*** Compassionate God, you gave the blind the insight to recognise you as their Saviour, enable us to repent. In your mercy, remove the scales from our eyes and lead us to worship you as our God and Redeemer. In the midst of our sorrow and despite the depth of our sins, give us the capacity to love you with all our hearts. May we journey together guided by your light, with one heart and one mind, as were the very first disciples. May the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ be upon us, so that together we glorify you in the Spirit’s fellowship, and witness to all those around us. Amen.

**DAY 7: “Then, opening their treasure chests, they offered him gifts of gold, frankincense, and myrrh” (Mt** **2:11)**

***Readings***: Hos 6:1-6; Ps 100; Acts 3:1-10; Mt 6:19-21

***Reflection:*** In our journey to Bethlehem, the city of bread, we contemplate the wise men who came to pay homage to the Christ-child. They opened their treasures, and offered the new-born king their gifts of gold, frankincense, and myrrh.

Our historical divisions, our fixation with rules and rituals, and our preoccupation with worldly matters, have broken us apart. So, what gifts have we prepared to offer to the king who comes to illuminate our lives and lead us to the grace of unity? We know that God does not want our riches or burnt offerings, but rather that his power works through our poverty: “I have no silver or gold”. The Lord desires our loving hearts: hearts full of love for Him and for our brothers and sisters in Christ from whom we are separated; hearts flowing with acts of mercy; and hearts truly penitent and desiring change. Let us then prepare for him the gift of a heart full of love. Christ has already given the gift of unity to his Church. We grow in communion as we share the graces our different traditions have received, acknowledging that the source of all our gifts is the Lord.

***Prayer:*** All praise, glory and thanksgiving to you, O God. You have revealed yourself in the epiphany of your Son both to those who have long awaited your coming, and to those who were not expecting you. You know the suffering that surrounds us, the pain caused by our divisions. As we join the wise men coming from afar, we pray that you open our hearts to your love and to the love of our brothers and sisters around us. Give us the will and the means to work towards the transformation of this world and to offer each other gifts that may nurture our communion. Receive our prayer in the name of your Son Jesus Christ who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit. Amen.

**DAY 8: “They left for their own country by another road” (Mt 2:12)**

***Readings*:** Jer 31:31-34; Ps16; Eph 4:20-23; Mt 11:25-30

***Reflection:*** We do not know what the wise men thought - they who were experts in astronomy and navigation - when they were warned to return by another road. They may well have been very confused, but the same light that illumined their journey showed them that there was another road, another possibility. They were called to change direction. We often find ourselves bound by our familiar ways of doing things and of seeing the world. When these ways or ‘roads’ are closed, we wonder how to continue the journey. God’s divine providence is always there to show us that there is another way prepared for us. We only have to trust that the everlasting One who gave us the light, can always find a way forward when our ways and paths are blocked. A fresh start is always possible when we are willing and open to the work of the Spirit. On the old familiar roads Christian communities have walked apart from one another. On the new roads to which God calls us, Christians walk together and become pilgrim companions. Finding these new roads demands discernment, humility and courage. Now is the time for conversion and reconciliation.

***Prayer:*** Gracious God, when we only know one way and we think we must return to it, and when we think that all roads are blocked, we always find you there. We find you creating a new path before us, one that we did not expect. We thank you for your wisdom that surpasses our understanding. We thank you because your creative paths open up unforeseen possibilities. If we search our maps and find no route, nonetheless we always find you, who lead us by a yet more excellent way. We pray through Jesus Christ our Lord, in the fellowship of the Holy Spirit, that you will always lead us back to you. Amen.